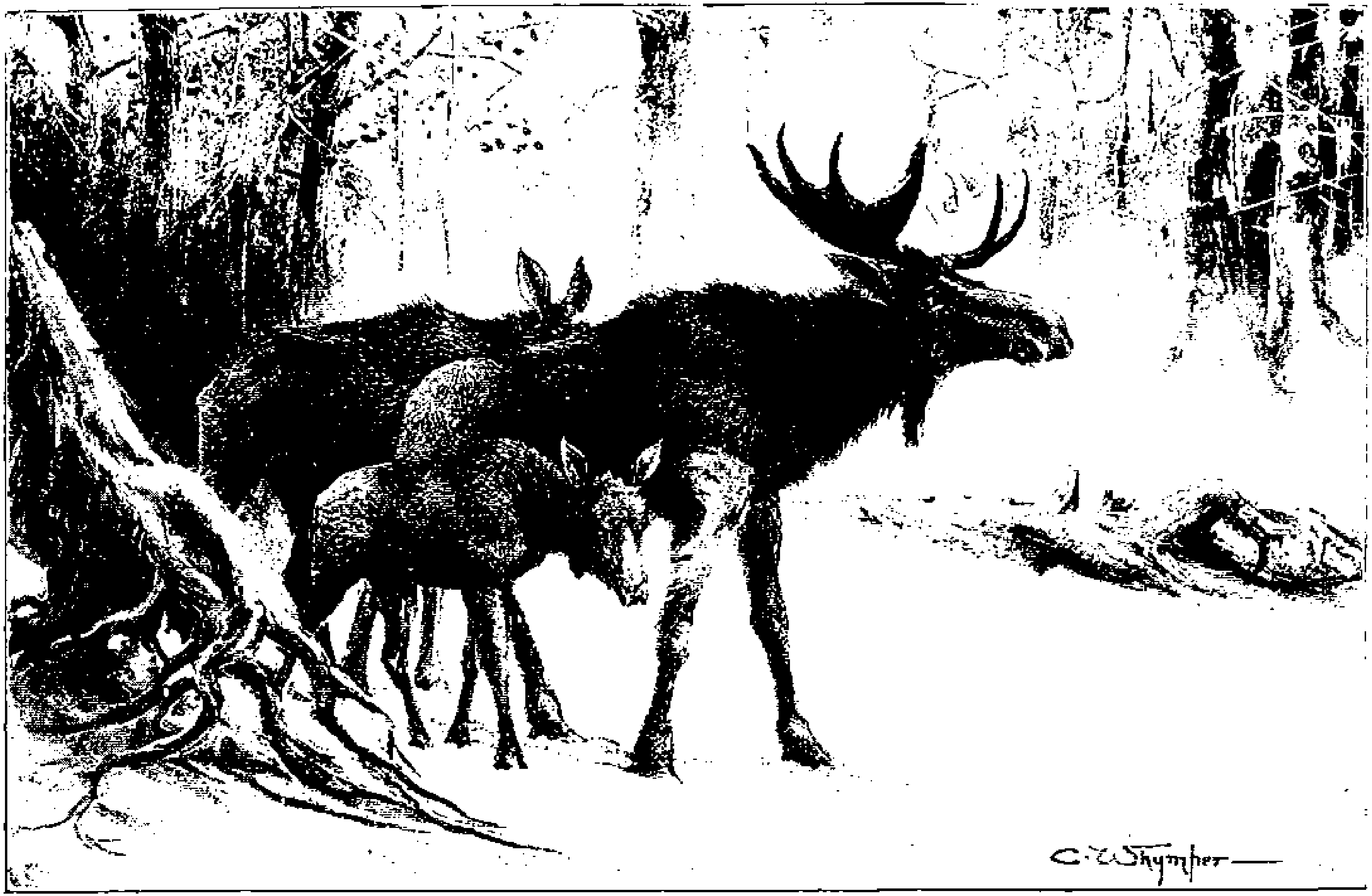

"Crossing the open was a beautiful bull elk, followed by a fine cow and a half-grown calf." —*Page* 247.

OUT OF DOORS IN TSARLAND

A RECORD OF THE SEEINGS AND DOINGS OF A WANDERER IN RUSSIA

BY FRED. J. WHISHAW

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PREFACE.

In offering this little volume to the public, I indulge myself with the hope that a book on Russia, in whose pages, from beginning to end, no reference is made to Russia's Mission in the East, or Peter the Great's Will, no allusion to Nihilists, and no mention whatever of Siberia, may possibly be esteemed a novelty by readers. As for the actual contents of the volume, I would ask my readers to regard these indulgently as the untutored record of impressions left upon the mind of an unscientific observer, after a residence of some years' duration in a country to which he owes a deep debt of gratitude for many happy days spent within its moors and forests, its towns and villages.

Should I be so fortunate as to incline any of my readers to believe that, in spite of all that has been

written upon the seamy side of Russia and the Russians, there exists nevertheless much which is admirable in that well-abused country, both indoors and out, and much which is interesting and lovable in its people, I should feel that I had discharged at least a fractional portion of that debt.

F. J. W.

LONDON, *Christmas* 1892.

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I

A RUSSIAN VILLAGE—I

ANY one journeying through Russia must be struck by the exact similarity of each village to its fellows. He will see the same tumble-down wooden huts extending for a quarter of a mile on each side of the road, with the same solitary two-storied edifice in the centre of the village—the abode of the tradesman of the place; the same lean dogs will come out of the houses as he passes, to contest his right of way; the same herd of cows, at the same hour of the afternoon, will crowd down the street, monopolising every inch of the muddy road (there is no footpath), to his extreme discomfort and no slight alarm; and the same *pastuch*, or cowherd, will wait until the stranger's ear is exactly opposite the end of his long pipe, and will then emit a nondescript sound which will make that stranger wish he had never been born, or at all events that he had been born deaf. It is this sound which brings the cows

out of he wonders what hiding-places behind the huts. As the herd moves wading slowly through the deep mud along the road, each house or yard seems to shoot out its contribution of one cow, or two cows, or six, according to the wealth of the owner, until the last hut is passed, when the whole herd turns abruptly to the side, gets over the ditch as best it can, and distributes itself over the communal pasture-land.

The casual passer-by will not see much of the inhabitants of the village unless he happens to wander through it late in the evening of a summer's day. Then indeed he will find it full of life and sound. A band of girls, all dressed in picturesque colours, are to be seen sitting upon a bench outside one of the houses, singing at the top of their voices, not in unison, but taking at least two and sometimes three parts, the first voice singing about an octave higher than ordinary sopranos can conveniently manage. Further on a band of men will be found standing or lounging about and enjoying similar vocal exercise, their higher tones being exceedingly nasal, but the basses excellent. All these good people are endowed by nature with the gift of harmony. A man with a bass voice can always improvise a bass or sing a

second to a higher voice. As for the children of the village, they will have been hounded away to bed at this time of night; but earlier in the day they may be seen playing out in the road, generally with a species of knucklebones, or with a kind of ninepins or skittles played with clubs, which are thrown at the uprights, instead of a ball. The boys make marvellously good shots with these clubs, knocking over a small ninepin with certainty at a distance of twenty or thirty yards. The rival singing bands occasionally leave their seats and parade the village street, never mixing with one another, but occasionally indulging in loud personalities of a humorous but somewhat unrefined nature as they meet or pass.

Let us pay a visit, reader, you and I, to a typical village: let us choose Ruchee, which is not far from St. Petersburg. I shall prove an excellent guide here, for I have visited this hamlet many and many a time, and know it well. In one of yonder huts dwells a gamekeeper, one Ivan, who looks after the shooting interests of the district. Ivan is a great friend of mine, and is employed by an English gentleman, therefore you must not be surprised to find one *moujik* dressed differently from his fellows in this

village of Ruchee. He will turn out when we reach his hut, for one of the children whose noses are for ever glued to the window-pane will cry out "Get up, father, here are the English *Barins!*" and when he appears you will see something like a costume!

But we have not reached the village yet. Yonder it lies; a long straight road, you see, as usual, with the houses built at uneven distances along each side. In the middle of the village the road takes a dip, down and up again, the lowest point being an extremely rickety bridge, consisting of wooden planks insecurely nailed to piles driven into the bed of the tiny stream which it spans. Beyond this village we can just see the first houses of another, Mourino. Mourino possesses a church, and is a *selo*, or chief of a group of villages. About Mourino I shall have more to say by-and-by.

Here is Ruchee. A few yards before we reach the first hut is a post with a notice-board upon it. Let us read the legend if we can; it is rather indistinct:

RUCHEE,
46 souls.

That is all. We knew it was Ruchee; but what does 46 *souls* mean? A soul is a man, not a woman.

Women have no souls, according to the code of the Russian official district tax-collectors, for whose benefit the post and its information exist. I hope my reader, if I have one, is not a lady; for I feel that I shall incur her odium as the purveyor of this shocking evidence of the ungallant quality of the official Russian mind. But alas! it is too true. In Russia, so the proverb says, there is but one soul to seven women. The tax-gatherer, however, does not credit the ladies with even one seventh of a soul apiece, he ignores their claims altogether; in his eyes they do not exist, they are nonentities. The men have all the souls, for they pay all the taxes. Those who pay no taxes have no souls. But whether they have no souls because they pay no taxes, or whether they pay no taxes because they have no souls, I have not yet found a tax-gatherer sufficiently well-informed to tell me.

Well, then, Ruchee claims to contain 46 souls within its limits. A man-child, so soon as born, is a soul; so that some of these 46 souls may be infants. On the other hand, Ruchee may be teeming with a population of hundreds of girls and women, but it can only boast of 46 souls, for the poor girls do not count. I ought to explain, however, that the above

estimate of the population of Ruchee dates from the last Government revision, perhaps ten years since. Therefore other souls may have been born to the village, which may of course contain more or less souls by this time, according to the balance of male births and deaths for the period. It is necessary to set up these official statistical posts because the total amount of tax imposed upon the village, as its payment for the use of the communal land, depends upon the number of "souls" alive in the village at the date of revision. The distribution of the land among the souls is looked after within the village itself, as I shall presently explain, without official interference from outside, and is guided by considerations of equity rather than by strict rule. For it is evident that to saddle a family of small male babies with the actual share of land and concomitant taxes for which as "souls" they are responsible, would be as unfair as to expect a widow with one son and five strapping daughters to live on the single share of land to which alone, as possessing but one soul among them, they are entitled.

But let us enter the village. What a barking of dogs greets us as we do so! Every hut seems to have contributed a cur, and every cur looks as if he

would eat us up if he had time for anything besides barking. A stone deftly aimed produces a wonderful effect upon these Russian village dogs. They are not brave. Only one is struck, but his sorrow is pitiful to witness as he disappears full gallop down the street, going very much faster and farther than the occasion demands—the sight, and the pathetic sound of his yelps, quickly discouraging the rest, who accept the inevitable and trot home again with a mourning aspect about the tail. Three small children rush shrieking and shouting from the first hut as we pass it, but stop dead on seeing us. They stare in silence until we have proceeded ten yards or so, when they set up a chorus of "Barin, dai kopaykoo" (Give us a kopeck, Mister).

Between the houses we can catch glimpses of the fields, which seem to be divided with mathematical accuracy into long strips. Upon these strips of land red-shirted peasants and women are hard at work, for, strange to say, it is not a holiday, and the villagers are actually up and about. At least half the week in Russia is "holiday" of so pronounced a kind that it is considered wicked to do work of any sort. As it generally takes a day or so to recover from a Russian holiday, which is spent brawling over

vodka, in the village *traktir*, little time remains for work. The hay is just ready for cutting, and we may observe that out of yonder huge field of waving grasses an occasional strip is already cut, one patch here and another there. For this is one of the communal fields, and is divided in strips among the "souls" of the village, each soul possessing one, which he may generally cultivate how he pleases. The village owns three or four of these large fields, each subdivided as this one; but one is probably devoted to the growing of oats, another to a crop of rye, this one, as we have seen, is hay, and the fourth is probably lying fallow. The peasants will generally prefer to grow one crop over the entire field, each cutting his own portion when he thinks fit, or when he is not drunk, if he can find a day under the latter category. But if he prefers it he may grow a patch of oats in the middle of the hay-field, or a patch of potatoes amid the rye strips of his neighbours. Shall we enter one of these houses in order to see what ideas the moujiks and their families have as to making themselves comfortable at home? Very well, let us choose my friend Ivan's, then. Here it is, no better than its neighbours, though Ivan receives his wages of ten roubles per month regularly, and is therefore

richer than his fellows by about £12 a year. This consideration has not apparently induced him to mend his broken window, however, for the hole is stopped up with a piece of one of his wife's old dresses (I remember seeing her dressed in that very print a year or two ago). One of the children is of course staring out of the window—there! she has seen us. Now Ivan will appear *in propriâ personâ.* Here he is, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand, and yawning cavernously. (Ivan! you have been drinking, little father! I shall think twice about presenting you with a rouble "for tea" next time you carry my game-bag after the ptarmigan.)

What an object the man is! On his shaggy head, which is covered with long yellow hair, he wears a soft English hat, the gift of his British employer. Over his broad shoulders is a Norfolk jacket, derived from the same source. So far he is an Englishman, though a disreputable one! From the coat downwards he is a moujik. His feet are encased in a pair of long boots, into which are tucked the ends of a pair of baggy cotton trousers. From beneath the Norfolk jacket protrude the tails of a red shirt, which tails are not tucked into the trousers, but are worn outside. There is a saying in Russia that so long

as a Russian wears his shirt outside he remains honest; but when he begins to tuck it in, like a civilised Christian, he is no longer to be trusted. There may be some truth in this. The *chinovniks* (officials) and their tribe, being higher up the social ladder, have learned, among other arts, that of dressing themselves according to the usages of modern society. Whether the ancestors of these gentlemen ever were honest in their red-shirted days I am not in a position to state; but this I know, that their descendants are very far from it now. On the other hand, Ivan, who wears his red shirt in a manner which should have ensured his strict adherence to the paths of truth and righteousness, is a very considerable liar. I may say that I have known other moujiks not altogether immaculate. What then becomes of the proverb?

Ivan graciously permits us to enter and explore his domain. In the porch, reached by falling over three decayed steps into a pit, and then getting out of it and climbing, by a gymnastic effort, upon the platform which the steps originally led to—in this porch, hanging from a hook at the top, is a kind of earthen vessel something like a teapot, with two handles and a short spout. This is the family lavatory. When

a member of the family desires to wash—which happens on very rare occasions—he stands underneath the water-vessel and tilts a very small quantity of the liquid into one hand. He then divides the water impartially between his two hands and applies both to his face. Part of his countenance thus receives a little attention from one or other of the damp hands, and lo! he is clean—a misleading expression signifying that his ablutions are over for several days. There is another method of washing, but my pen revolts from a description of it. Enough to mention that the mouth is applied to the spout of the teapot, and all further washing is done with the water thus procured. In a word, the Russian moujik considers his weekly or fortnightly steam-bath quite as much in the way of personal cleansing as is good for him. I shall describe the village bath in its proper place, but meanwhile we are keeping Ivan standing outside his door, ready to show us in. As we enter the house three dogs rush out and nearly knock us over, whining and jumping on us with every demonstration of delight. You may see at once that these are English dogs. They belong to Ivan's employer, my old friend A., and are under the impression that we have come to take them out shooting. They know at a glance

perhaps I should say at a sniff—that we are Britons, and are looking about for our guns. Lie down, Bruce and York! we have come to see your house, there is no shooting to be done to-day. These dogs live with Ivan on terms of equality, and feed rather better than he does; but then Ivan gets plenty of vodka, and they do not. Ivan's is a one roomed house—that is, there is but one room for general use. There is indeed a sort of black hole, opposite, quite dark and very small, where Ivan keeps his poultry, snowshoes, and other articles out of place in a drawing-room. The living room is a good size, perhaps fifteen feet by thirteen. It has two small windows, with four panes in each. Of these eight panes six are intact or nearly so, the seventh is half gone, the eighth entirely so—the latter being stopped up with a portion of Mrs. Ivan's old print skirt, as I have already mentioned. Round two sides of the room runs a narrow bench, about a foot in width. In front of this, at the corner, is the table. In another corner of the room is the stove, a huge brick structure reaching almost to the ceiling, five feet in breadth and four feet deep, and having a lower portion jutting out from the side to a length of six feet or so. This branch establishment is used by the family to sleep upon,

and a nice warm bed it makes. As for the stove itself, a description of its working may be of interest to the reader. The door of the stove is a foot or so from the ground, and opens into a huge empty cavern formed by the whole of the inside of the stove. Into this logs of wood are thrust, in quantities, and ignited. This is only the beginning, and the heat of the wood while burning is a mere trifle. When the logs are reduced to red embers the door of the stove is shut up tight and the chimney securely closed. By this means all the heat is kept in the stove, which soon becomes a veritable "scorcher," and retains its heat for nearly twenty-four hours. But woe to the inhabitants of the house if the chimney be closed before the wood shall have been properly consumed, for speedy suffocation is their certain fate—death if they happen to be asleep, terrible nausea and sickness if awake and able to whisk off the iron covering which closes the chimney, in time to save their lives. I have spoken to an English gentleman who once nearly fell a victim to suffocation through the carelessness of a Russian servant. He was passing the night at a shooting-box near St. Petersburg, and, the cold being intense, had instructed the keeper, on retiring, to enter his room at six in the morning and relight

the stove, in case it should have cooled down by that time. The keeper obeyed these instructions to the letter, but closed the chimney *before* the wood had been sufficiently reduced. At half past seven my friend was awakened by the most violent headache he had ever experienced, accompanied by terrible sickness. He barely had strength to crawl out of bed and stagger into the fresh air—thus saving his life—when he fell insensible in the snow. There he was found shortly afterwards half-frozen and very ill, but alive enough to address remarks to that offending keeper which were almost sufficiently strong to thaw the snow in which he found himself outstretched.

Three small children climb down from the top of the stove as we enter Ivan's room, and stand staring up at us. On the table there is a *samovar*, or Russian urn, hissing comfortably, and Mrs. Ivan smiles and bows over it. She has been cutting hunks from a large round loaf of black bread, for this is dinner-time. There is also a smoked herring lying on the table, half wrapped in a truly horrible scrap of newspaper. Probably Ivan will get the whole of this dainty morsel, for he is a "soul" and must be fed up; black bread will do excellently well for the women, who have no souls to support. No, thank

you, Mrs. Ivan, we won't take any tea, though it is very kind of you to offer it. As far as I can see, you only possess one tumbler, and that a remarkably unclean one. What would the Soul do, if we used his only tumbler? You suggest, reader, that Ivan would go to the *kabak* and drink vodka, and so he would; but he will do this anyhow, for we shall probably give him twenty kopecks for his services in showing us over his establishment, and Ivan's money all goes one way. There are small lumps of sugar lying promiscuously about the table. These are not placed in the tea, but are nibbled at before drinking in order to sweeten each mouthful as taken.

A few coppers will make those small children very happy; the money will be spent upon *priänniki*, or biscuits, and will go a long way.

Ivan's room is not too clean, and as for the scent thereof, well, if it were not for the half-broken pane of glass it would be still worse, and that is all we can say for it.

There is no second story, but there is a *cherdak*, or garret, under the roof. This is reached by a ladder from outside, and is used by Ivan for drying his clothes, on the rare occasion of a wash; for hiding away a store of grain, if he has managed to

accumulate such; and for putting away sundry household rubbish. Behind the house is a yard, knee-deep in mud, and at the end of the yard a shed Half of this shed is used as a receptacle for Ivan's cart, plough, and sledge; the other half is the dwelling-place of the cows and horses, when these are at home; but the cows are out most of the day and night in the summer-time, on the pasture-lands, while the horses, at work during the day, herd with the cows at night.

So much for Ivan's establishment, which is the facsimile of every other moujik-home in the village, with the exception of that of the *koopyets*, or trader, whose house is much larger, and is built in two stories, towering thus over its poorer neighbours like a big policeman among a crowd of urchins. It will repay us to look in for a moment upon Abram Timofeyevitch Kapustyin, the powerful and wealthy individual who dispenses bread, vodka, herrings, calico prints, red shirts, and *prianniki* to the peasant folk of Ruchee. This gentleman is seated at a small table in his shop; he is drinking tea with lemon in it, and is engaged in conversation with a moujik, who turns out to be the *Starost*, or elder, of the village. Of the latter, and of his office, I shall speak presently.

As for the trader, he is a sleek, well-to-do, comfortable-looking personage. His power in the place is enormous, for every moujik owes him money, and depends upon him, not only for his daily supply of black bread (when the home-grown stock of rye comes to an end), but for his vodka, his clothes, everything he needs. This individual is often a large landholder, though a stranger to the place; for peasants who have fallen heavily into his debt, thanks, generally, to the national partiality for vodka, are glad to wipe off a portion of their indebtedness, and by so doing become qualified to consume further *vedra* of vodka on "tick," by letting their allotments of land.

We will take a cup of tea at Abram Timofeyevitch's invitation, and buy a red shirt and a startlingly coloured handkerchief or two to show our friends at home. The tea is good tea before it is drowned by Abram Timofeyevitch. How long he has been drinking from this one decoction in the small teapot I know not; but this I know, that his tea is the colour of the very palest sherry. We drink it out of tumblers and bite our sugar dry. The tea, or rather the very slightly bewitched water, is frightfully hot, and the bit of lemon floating in it gets terribly in the

way as we try to dodge it in order to drink the scorching fluid. Abram will continue to replenish your tumbler until you sigh, turn the tumbler upside down, rise from your place, and shake hands with him as a sign that you have had enough. You must also shake hands with every other individual who has assisted in emptying Abram's huge *samovar*, thanking them "for their company."

There are several groups of peasants drinking tea at other tables; some are taking vodka and are rather noisy, but there is not much consumption of strong liquor at this time of day. At night the apartment will present a very different aspect. There will be such a babel of sound—singing and dancing and general uproar on the part of the Souls of the place—that were we to pass the house at a distance of half a mile we should conclude that this village must be the veritable home of Bacchus and his satellites. The shop itself is filthy, the counter being covered with a disorderly array of small bottles containing vodka, piles of black bread, many of the loaves being half cut, a keg of herrings whose odour is making a good fight for supremacy with that of the all-pervading vodka, some dishes of black-looking biscuits, which were once white but have lost their youth and

good looks waiting for a purchaser among the children, who have evidently had no harvest of coppers lately, and a tub of Finnish butter. The handkerchiefs and calico prints are not displayed for sale in this room, but are sold in a similar shop adjoining; if you peep in, reader, you will see several women handling these articles and haggling over the price. Nothing, no article of commerce, ever changes hands in Russia without a bargain. Let me describe how a purchase is effected at the Gostinnoy Dvor (a sort of permanent market) in St. Petersburg. We will imagine that the buyer wishes to become the possessor of a yard or two of velvet. He finds a shop (or *magázine*, as it is styled in Russia) likely to have for sale the article required and enters it, asking to be allowed to see velvet of the colour needed. The shopman is delighted to serve him, and says so.

"How much?" inquires the would-be purchaser, as he fingers the material brought for his inspection.

Shopman—"Ah, Barin, I can see you know all about velvets! That is the best piece in my shop: will you pay seven roubles the *arshine?*"

Buyer (contemptuously)—"You take me for a fool. I'll give you four!"

Shopman—"Ach, Barin, you have come to laugh

at me! By my honest word it cost me six and a half."

Buyer—"Nonsense! Will you accept four roubles, or" (here the buyer slowly takes his hat from the counter, having doffed it upon entering the shop, in deference to the universal custom).

Shopman—"No, Barin, have mercy! give me six roubles and I'll wrap it up for you!"

The would-be buyer stamps his foot in assumed wrath, but does not in the least deceive the shopman thereby. He puts on his hat, however, and makes slowly for the door. This looks a little more serious. "Well, five seventy-five—five and a half!" The buyer has reached the door. "Come!" says the shopman, in a cordial, confident tone. "You shall have it for five." The would-be buyer slowly returns towards the counter. "No," he says, "I have said four roubles. But I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll give you four twenty-five, take it or leave it!" The shopman now puts on an injured air, and commences to replace the velvet. "The Barin is not a *boná-fide* customer," he says sadly. "I thought you meant business, Barin!"

The buyer, who wants the stuff rather badly, for it is just the colour and quality he needs, returns slowly

once more towards the door, puts his hat on, fumbles with the door—he is anxious to give the seller every chance to "climb down"—at last he turns the handle and passes regretfully down the street. Before he has gone ten yards, however, he is arrested by the voice of the vendor.

"Pojahlooetye, Barin" (Take it then, sir!), cries that individual, and the purchaser returns. But the bargain is still not quite a *fait accompli*, for the shopman has one more struggle in him, though gaffed, "The Barin will add twenty-five kopecks, I know!" he says in a coaxing, though confident and even bracing tone. But the Barin is inexorable, and seeing this the vendor finally comes down, and the parcel and the purchaser leave the shop together. Abram Timofeyevitch, however, has mostly fixed prices for his wares, and his clients, who are all in his debt, dare not bargain much.

Outside Abram's house are two long troughs, one filled with water, the other at present empty. By the evening there will be two long rows of Finnish peasants' *telyegi*, or small two-wheeled carts, standing by these troughs, the little bony Finn horses resting and feeding and drinking at this, the first stopping stage outside St. Petersburg. These people pass their

lives in journeying from village to town and back, carrying butter, fish, and a little grain to the metropolis, acting as carriers for the village whence they come, and bringing back manufactured goods and other necessaries. They are a patient, frugal folk, talk very little Russian, and jog contentedly backwards and forwards over the execrable Russian roads, or no-roads, generally fast asleep, and trusting to their faithful little steeds to bring them to the haven where they would be. This the ponies do, but take their own time about it, stopping where they like, and putting on a spurt when it pleases them, but always pulling up safely at their destination.

These lines of Finnish carts toiling slowly along the execrable roads leading from the capital in every direction, and consisting of from five to thirty vehicles, each the exact counterpart of its neighbour, form quite a feature in the Russian landscape, no representation of which is complete without a glimpse of such a procession.

But we must bid farewell to Abram Timofeyevitch and his shop, for we have still much to see. Abram himself and the Starost rise with us, but their first duty is to turn to the *Obraz*, or Ikon, in the corner of the room, crossing themselves before it, and muttering perfunctorily a word or two by way of

grace after tea. In front of the *Obraz* hangs a tiny lamp, the light of which is never suffered to go out. The Starost has kindly offered to be our guide for the rest of our sightseeing, so we will take leave of Abram, and put ourselves under his wing, leaving Ivan (richer by twenty kopecks) to make a show of going home, but well aware that as soon as we are out of sight he will return to the *traktir* and expend that silver coin upon noxious fluids. As for Abram, he is quite ready to refill his much-enduring teapot, out of which he has probably already imbibed at least thirty cups, and begin again with the first customer who will join in his potations. The tea is no longer distinguishable from water, but that does not matter, for is there not hot water, lemon, and lump sugar in abundance?

But I must reserve the record of my wanderings with the Starost, and the many weighty matters which I learned at his hands, for another chapter. Let us therefore step forth into the village street once more, reader, under the guidance of the principal Soul of the place, waving our hand as we do so to Abram, who, by-the-bye (not being a native moujik), is not a Soul at all, not even a lemon-Soul, though he is so faithful an adherent to the delights of tea with lemons.

II

A RUSSIAN VILLAGE—II

Russian moujiks may be divided into two great classes, and to one of these every moujik may be said, as a general rule, to belong. Either he is prosperous, good-natured, a moderate drinker, intelligent, and communicative; or he is poor, morose, dissatisfied, a hard drinker, cruel at home, sulky, and, excepting when drunk, taciturn. Vodka loosens his tongue, however, and he becomes, when under its malignant influence, the noisiest of mortals—standing at his cottage door for hours, and relieving his feelings by abusing, at the top of his voice, his wife, his neighbours, and the world in general. The Starost of Ruchee, Matvei Ivanovitch Shahgin, belongs, fortunately, to the former category. He proves to be a delightfully communicative guide, full of sense and information, and by no means averse to imparting what he knows; we ourselves being equally delighted to listen and learn. Firstly, then, we wish

to know what the title "Starost" means, and what is the nature of the office which our friend occupies and adorns. "Starost," we learn, signifies the elder of the village, and he is elected by the Heads of Households, or *Hozyaeva*, each *hozyaeen* having a voice in the election, which takes place once every few years. There is very little competition on the part of the moujiks for the office of Starost, for the pay is merely nominal — a few roubles annually, together with the presentation of a paltry medal; while the trouble and responsibilities attached to the post are considerable. For instance, the Starost is responsible for the due payment by the moujiks of their Government taxes; he is obliged to convene periodical meetings of the Mir, or village commune (the members of which are the Hozyaeva), and to preside over its deliberations, acting as Speaker, Teller, and Whip in one. All purely local affairs are discussed at these meetings; local quarrels are settled, punishments are inflicted, often corporal: the apportioning of the communal land is attended to; the proper dates for cutting hay and reaping are discussed and settled; and the passports of the villagers are seen to and renewed in their season. The most important of the functions of the Mir is

undoubtedly that of fixing how much of the communal land is to be taken over and cultivated by each moujik. Where the land is good and repays every stroke of the spade with interest, the difficulty of apportioning the allotments without creating jealousies is considerable: for each moujik will naturally be anxious to obtain as large a share of the whole as possible. On the other hand, in districts where the land is poor and requires much manuring and more work in order to produce results commensurate with the amount of tax to be paid upon it, the moujik will naturally show little anxiety to saddle himself with more than is absolutely necessary. Hence it is difficult to please all parties, whether the land be good or bad. It falls to the village government to settle such delicate questions as these, the outside authorities having nothing whatever to do with the matter, excepting in so far as to collect the total amount of Government taxation due from the village in consideration of the number of souls, or males, which it contains. As to the exact situation of the particular strips of land which become the share of each individual, this is settled by lot, the portions which are nearest to the village being, of course, *cæteris paribus*, the more desirable in pro-

portion to their proximity to the peasant's own home. The decisions of the Mir are accepted without demur. If any moujik be condemned to castigation, or imprisonment in the village lock-up, he bears his punishment with philosophic equanimity, and without questioning the right of the community to inflict it. I was present at a meeting of the village parliament, and present too in the part of accuser. The accused was an *isvoschick*, or driver, who had first imposed upon me, and, being detected, had covered his dishonesty with impertinence, an exceedingly rare instance of this latter fault; for a moujik, with all his failings, is, as a rule, remarkably respectful to a "Barin." The Hozyaheva were specially convened upon my complaining of the man's conduct, and I was requested to be present as prosecutor. The meeting was held in the *pravlenie* of the village (a small public hall or meeting-place), and was attended by about a dozen of the Heads of Houses, the delinquent being also in attendance. The Starost presided and stated the case to his compeers, after which he proceeded to question accuser and accused. The latter pleaded guilty and begged abjectly for mercy, falling upon his knees and walking about on them from the Starost to myself and back again, several times.

Needless to say I interceded on the wretched man's behalf, for he looked the very picture of misery, and he was let off with a very moderate dose of imprisonment, the "knout" being in his case foregone. The assembly of hozyaheens then dispersed, it being Sunday afternoon, to the *traktir*, the business of sitting in judgment having proved a thirst-engendering occupation.

I should mention among the duties of the village Mir that of making contracts for any work that may have to be done, or for the disposal of communal property; of letting the shooting over the village land; of hearing petitions for the erection of new buildings; of electing the tax-gatherer, the *pastuch*, or cowherd, the *ooriadnik*, or un-uniformed policeman, who acts under the *Stanovoy* (inspector of rural police); and to see that the peasants' passports, &c., are all in order. The Starost himself is of course elected by the Mir, as also is the *peesar*, or scribe, a subordinate but almost omnipotent official, who can write practically what he pleases, for few or none of the peasants can read what he has written. As to this, however, the coming generation will occupy a far stronger position with regard to their *peesarui*, for, thanks to the Zemstva, whose duty it is to see

after education, road-making, sanitation, bridge-building, &c., the proportion of juvenile moujiks who can read and write is becoming daily greater. Such, roughly sketched, is the Mir, or rural commune, as described by Matvei Ivanovitch Shahgin, its honoured chief at Ruchee, under whose guidance we will now continue our voyage of discovery. Here we are on the rickety bridge. When we step on one end of a board the other end jumps up to salute us, an arrangement which has its drawbacks when a pedestrian coming from the other side happens to reach his end of the board just as you step upon yours! However, a bruised shin is better than falling through into the river, and there is no third alternative. The bridge is awkward too for drivers, and it is as well to cross it at foot's pace. Down below, at distances along the bank, several women are busy washing clothes, their dresses tucked up to their bare knees. They are singing as they rinse, one taking a solo verse, and the rest catching up the tune in two parts, as chorus.

In the winter the clothes-washing is done at holes in the ice, and must be a terribly cold process. There is very little water, but enough apparently for the boys to bathe in, for there are a score of them

paddling and splashing about, shrieking and laughing. Their preparations for the bath are simple. They take off their sole garment, a shirt, tied round the waist, and there they are! Very few can boast a pair of trousers in the summer, and none wear boots or socks.

Now we proceed on our journey. Explain, please, Matvei Ivanovitch, what is the meaning of the rude emblematical signs painted in front of each house. One is something which might represent a round tower, or may be meant for a tub of water; another a ladder; here is something remotely suggestive of a hatchet; there are two more tubs, and beyond is another ladder. Matvei explains that the presentments which have so much astonished us are meant to indicate the particular article each household is expected to provide and use in the event of an alarm of fire in the village. As the peasants have a system of mutual insurance against fire, each moujik will assuredly do his best and quickest to bring the article for which he is responsible, and to put it into immediate operation, the moment he is summoned. There is a growing crowd of children following us about by this time; probably the fame of our modest gift to Ivan's brats has gone abroad, and the little

ones are looking "kopecks" at us. What a queer lot they are! Little girls in print dresses down to their heels, looking like miniature editions of their mothers. This dress is all they wear—there is nothing beneath. The tiny boys—one or two of them—have absolutely nil, the rest are in dirty print shirts, with shockingly grimy little legs showing in profusion. A few coppers send the whole band flying towards the village shop, where the *prianniki* (biscuits) are to be had. There will be a run on these to-day!

Here we are at the bath-house. This is a small hut lying back from the street. It looks so black from the perpetual smoke in which it passes its existence, that one would suppose it to be the half-burned wreck of an abandoned house. It is nothing of the sort, however; on the contrary, it is one of the most popular and useful institutions in the place. Inside is an enormous stove, and along the wall are shelves wide enough to lie upon. When the stove is heated to its full extent the atmosphere is, to an Englishman, intolerable. I have tried the pleasures of a Russian bath once, and that one experience still remains and shall for ever remain the sum total of my investigations in this direction. To say that I was stewed is to convey a very feeble idea of my

feelings on that occasion. I entered the bath-house—it was not a village one, but an aristocratic establishment in St. Petersburg—resolved to try the depths and shoals of the business, and if I liked it, to have a good time and come again. There was a presiding functionary whose duty it was to put you on the shelves and take you off again when you were cooked through. There are two or three elevations, or grades of heat. The first shelf in the hot room is the "cool" one (?). The next is the one to get into if you desire to share the feelings of the boiled lobster, and to emerge on a par with that succulent creature as to his colour. For the third shelf, if you are ever so unfortunate as to find yourself there, may all good spirits and influences get you out again before you are reduced to protoplasm. Personally, I never got beyond the second shelf, and should never have proceeded so far as this if I had guessed what it was going to be like. The torturer in charge is armed with a birch rod with the leaves on, and with this instrument he belabours you (while you lie there helplessly boiling, mark you) from head to foot, never actually touching you, but frightening you out of your wits, and driving the scalding steam, as it appears, into the pores of your skin at one side of

you and out of them at the other. As for me, I clambered down from that shelf a parboiled but determined man, and if there is one thing in this world that I am absolutely sure of, it is that I shall never taste the joys of a Russian steam-bath again. The moujiks, however, in this village bath of theirs, reeking as it is with the smoke and heat and steam of years, delight to boil themselves down once a week or once a fortnight, lying sweltering upon the topmost shelf, until the heat has so completely impregnated them that they can with impunity rush out into the open air, stark naked, and roll in the snow: this being a regular item in the programme. The feat sounds dangerous, but does them no harm even in the severest frost, and is performed by one and all, young and old, as a matter of course.

The Starost has kindly offered to allow us to inspect his premises. However, all the houses are almost exactly alike, and as we have already seen one we will content ourselves with a look round his yard, of which he is evidently very proud. And justly so, for it is a model of cleanliness and prosperity. A large flock of pigeons rises at our feet as we approach, and flutters lazily to the house-top. These are not Ivan's, neither do they belong to any one else. They

are the pensioners of the village, and must on no account be disturbed; for the pigeon is in Russia a sacred bird, owing to his relationship to the dove. There exists a pigeon-shooting club in the metropolis, to supply the members of which with birds was, at first, an insurmountable difficulty, not from any lack of pigeons, for the city swarms with them, but on account of the veneration in which these are held by reason of sacred associations in connection with the dove. An ingenious purveyor, however, bethought him of a way of surmounting the difficulty. He explained that the birds he caught and sold were not *góloobui* (pigeons or doves) at all, but *peegeónui*. The birds cannot be cooked, however, when shot, either as *góloobui* or under the thin disguise of *peegeónui*, but must be sold to the restaurants, where the cooks and waiters are mostly Tartars, who are not afraid of committing a sacrilege, and here they eventually make their appearance as game-pie, quail, "gibier," spring-chicken, anything that an ingenious cook can invent, or a gullible public accept, barring their own *propria persona.*

Matvey Ivanovitch has four good horses and six cows; a buxom wife, who can do her share of work with the best; two strong daughters and three sons,

striplings just in their twenties. They are Souls and take their share of land, but they are not as yet married, and have not, therefore, left the parental roof. Hence the parental establishment sucks no small advantage from their presence. If Matvey can manage it he will endeavour to arrange that when these young men marry they shall continue to live under his roof, or at all events within his *dvor*, or yard, forming branch establishments, if they please, but continuing to act as parts of a whole. This will pay all far better than a subdivision into four families, each claiming his share of land and working it by himself. Union is strength, and as matters stand at present Matvey and his sons do marvellously well; for while the Starost with one son and two daughters does the farm work, Timoshka and Vainka are free to work either as *isvoschiks* (cab-drivers) in town, or as *yaliks* (ferry-men) on the Neva, bringing their earnings home, as a matter of course, for the good of the house.

Outside the yard of the Starost is the village well. The water is procured by the aid of a bucket at the end of a long rope attached to one arm of an enormous clumsy-looking lever. The other end of this is high up in the air, but can be pulled down by the aid of a

cord which hangs from it. When it is thus pulled downwards the other half naturally mounts upwards, drawing the bucket with it. Matvey explains that the peasants manure their fields by clearing out the cesspools in town. This they do at night, taking contracts beforehand with proprietors of houses in the metropolis to do the work for a trifling charge in consideration of the value, to them, of the manure thus obtained. Matvey's house is in better repair than that of Ivan; his windows are all glazed, and on the walls of the living room are two pictures representing sacred subjects, the colours used by the artist being of the most startling brightness, and laid on with strict impartiality and economy; the tint used for the robe of one apostle, for instance, being employed for the face of another, and the hair of a third, and so on. With the exception of the High Art thus resplendently bedecking its walls, the dwelling of this prosperous Starost is in no way more luxurious than that of his poorer neighbours. The family sleep where they can, on the stove or near it in winter, on the straw in the cow-house, or in one of the empty carts in the yard, on the warm summer nights.

Matvey is supposed to possess a considerable

hoard of ready money stored away somewhere, but no one knows where, not even his wife and sons. If you were to question him as to the truth of the report, however, Matvey would say, "Have mercy, Barin: look at the family I have to support, and six cows and three horses to feed! I have property, glory be to God, in live stock, as you see, but how is a peasant to save money? Our brother (*anglice*, "the likes of us") cannot save, we eat and are filled, and thank God for it." From which it may be inferred that the Starost, like most Russians, is an occasional wanderer from the strict paths of veracity.

Outside the house is an enormous stack of grotesquely-shaped roots, to be used, as required, for fuel. This pile has been accumulated gradually at odd times, and its counterpart may be observed near each peasant's dwelling. The Starost informs us that it is a pity we were not here on the preceding afternoon, for then we should have witnessed the annual *Krestnui Hod*. This, he explains, is a procession of peasants headed by the priest of the nearest *selo*, or head village of the Volost, a Volost being an association or combination of several village communes. The priest carries a huge ikon, and chants, with his deacon, a litany of praise, the whole cere-

mony being organised annually in commemoration of the day on which, some thirty years since, the plague of cholera was stayed, in answer to the prayers of the people. The day of the procession is the anniversary of that upon which the Angel of Death stayed his hand and took no more victims from Ruchee. He had already half depopulated the village, when he thus at length drew off and left them at peace.

We are now walking along the highroad leading from Ruchee to its elder sister, the *selo* Mourino. This is the centre of the group of village communes —the Volost. Yonder church, vaunting its gaudy green and golden tints in the sunlight, is the only one for miles around. But besides its church, Mourino can boast of a school, and a cottage hospital, where drugs can be bought, and where any one who is not in a particular hurry can leave a message for the doctor, who "may arrive in a day or two," the *feldscher*, or assistant surgeon, will tell you. Meanwhile the feldscher himself would be delighted to do anything for you, from prescribing for your baby's teething to cutting off your own leg; but it will be as well to decline his kind offer, for he is unlike Voltaire's doctor, who "poured drugs, of which he knew very little, into bodies of which he

knew nothing at all," in that our friend knows absolutely nothing about either drugs or bodies. Mourino can boast of a baker who bakes white bread; of a very large *traktir*, or eating and drinking establishment; of two shops for the sale of dress materials, and other goods; of over a hundred Souls, and of a *volostnoe pravlenie*, a small hall where the combined village communes of the district may meet in council. In other respects the houses of the peasants, the characteristics of the moujiks themselves, and their manner of living is in no way different from the manners and characteristics of the moujiks of Ruchee, or of any other Russian village from Bathsheba to Dan, or from Astrachan, let us say, to Archangel. The presence of the baker of white bread and of the vendor of dress materials is to be explained by the fact that Mourino, being twelve miles from town, is accessible as a summer resort, and is much patronised, so far as its accommodation suffices, by small *chinovniks* (civil servants), who rent from the peasants for a term of about ten weeks the wooden edifices which the latter have built along one side of the main street. These buildings are little superior to the huts of the peasants, and are mostly in a tumble-down condition. At the end of

the village street is the bridge spanning a river, the Ochta, a tributary of the Neva. The best situation in the place—that is, the land on the banks of the river—is occupied on the right by a large ruined stone house known as "The Count's House." This mansion belonged in its palmy days to the powerful prince Vorontzoff, but is now with its fine grounds, stretching in once tidy terraces down to the river, entirely given over to rack and ruin. On the left bank of the river a colony of English residents have for about a century been established. They have built themselves beautiful houses, and laid out gardens which any English gardener might be proud to claim as the product of his skill. They have English boats on the river, English dogs bark at you as you approach the extensive grounds, English voices greet you everywhere, and English children may be seen playing at English games: it is a bit of England. The colony establishes itself here every summer, coming down from St. Petersburg about May, and returning to town about the end of August. Speaking as one who knows it well, I may say that Mourino is one of the most delightful places in the world. The houses of the English colony are built upon the high ground overlooking river, meadow, and pine forest.

The shooting is in the hands of an English gentleman, who rents it partly from the peasants, and partly from the prince (Shouvaloff), who owns most of the property around. I am glad to say that the English are exceedingly popular among the natives of the place, whom they employ in various ways, as servants, coachmen, gardeners, &c. The ladies work for the Russian poor, and subscribe money annually for their needs during the winter, the funds being placed for distribution in the hands of the village priest.

The peasants of Mourino are possibly more prosperous than their neighbours of Ruchee, thanks to the presence in their midst of the British colony, but, with the exception of the fact that both moujiks and children are occasionally to be seen dressed partly *à l'anglais* (in cast-off English clothes) and partly *à la Russe* in their own, they do not differ from the inhabitants of less fortunate villages, neither do they on this account alter their mode of life at home. Their houses are as dirty and squalid, the accommodation as limited, and the ordinary comforts of civilisation as entirely absent as in those of their poorer brethren in the interior.

The Russian moujik appears to have no ambition for a higher state of civilisation: he prefers to live in

the primitive and simple way in which his forefathers for hundreds of years have been content to exist before him. As the result of some knowledge of the villages of Northern Russia, the conclusion at which I have arrived with regard to the position and prospects of the moujik of to-day is, that the latter, if only he could keep clear of the wine-shops, should be one of the happiest of men. His allotment will support him if he works it diligently, and without being too scrupulous as to the question of labour on holidays. If he lives near a large town there are a hundred ways in which he may acquire wealth: by plying with horse and *tarantass* as isvoschik, or trading in milk, or cutting and selling firewood, &c. The main obstacle to his prosperity is the *kabak*, or drinking-shop. If only he could keep himself away from its seductive portals Ivan Ivanovitch should have, barring famines and the unforeseen generally, as good a chance of happiness as any class of man on the face of the earth. But his share of the communal land will not keep him in vodka and idleness. As for the house he lives in, it is not much of a place; but then he would not thank you for a better. Ivan Ivanovitch is deeply religious, though his religion is largely tainted with superstition; and

he cherishes a filial love for the reigning Tsar, leaving politics to his betters, or to those members of his family who are absent serving their time in the army, or making money as labourers in factory and workshop in the large towns, where the agitators can get hold of them to poison their minds. At home in his village he is quite content to lead the humdrum life of his forefathers, serving in patient docility his God and his Tsar, and having little thought for anything beyond the daily routine of work and sleep, with as much vodka thrown in as he can get hold of; for Ivan is rarely an abstainer. Far better is it for him when he clings thus to his ancestral Mir—tilling the soil like his forefathers before him, leading the life to which alone by nature and descent he is adapted, and keeping himself far away from the dangers of town and politics, which mar his simplicity and will lead him inevitably to his ruin.

III

IN THE STREETS OF ST. PETERSBURG *

I PROPOSE to notice in this paper a few of the commoner types to be met with in the streets of the Russian capital, and I select for my first model that much-maligned individual, the *gorodovoy*, or street policeman. I am afraid this functionary did not inspire in the mind of the writer that awe and respect which his appearance seems to awaken, or at all events is designed to awaken, within the minds of his compatriots. Unlike the splendid physical specimens which go to constitute our own unrivalled police force, the Russian policeman is usually a very small policeman indeed. What he lacks in size, however, he makes up in deportment and the dignity of his demeanour. The expression of his countenance is one of unbending severity; he never smiles; he is minute but majestic; dirty but dignified. His dress is a long

* By kind permission of the Editor of *Temple Bar*.

kaftan, which the ignorant would unhesitatingly pronounce to be a dressing-gown; a sword ornaments his left side, while his feet and legs are encased in huge Wellington boots; on his head he wears a small military cap. Every policeman lives in his own little house, about the size of a moderately-large dog-kennel, and one of these is planted at the corner of each principal thoroughfare. Here the little gorodovoy sleeps and eats his meals and disposes of the spare time upon his hands. The Russian policeman is generally asleep within whenever anything goes wrong without; but as soon as the danger is well over and the coast clear, he darts out to see what the matter is (or rather was), and, as a rule, without his outer garment, the undress uniform beneath being of the very lightest description. He soon returns for his kaftan, however, and the misdemeanants having by this time got well away, order is restored without much attendant danger or difficulty.

One of the principal duties of the Russian policeman is to awaken those unfortunates who have fallen asleep in the streets during a hard frost; these are usually either the isvoschik in his sledge, waiting for a fare, and dozing off ere that fare comes, into the

sleep of Lethe; or drunken men (all too common objects, alas! in St. Petersburg), who have tripped and fallen on the pavement, and have not the energy to get up again. The orthodox method of awakening such sleepers is to rub their ears violently backwards and forwards—a plan specially to be recommended, because it not only rouses the slumberer, but also puts him into such a rage that he is far too angry afterwards to fall asleep again.

The head of the police is, in Russia, a very powerful personage indeed, second only, practically, to the Tsar. Almost equally powerful is the chief of the secret police, from whose attentions no one, not even a British subject, is absolutely exempted; although the latter, if a law-abiding citizen, need have no cause to fear the results of the inevitable police investigations on his account, for these investigations are merely part of a system. They are conducted by the authorities concerned in secret, and nothing is known of them, either at the time or afterwards, by the individual whose affairs are thus, like those of every other inhabitant, placed in their turn under examination. Indeed, no person can live in the country of the Tsar without being so carefully studied, unbeknown

to himself, that in the archives of the secret police, under his number and letter, there exists a long and exhaustive account of his personal history: a list of his friends and associates; a description of his occupations and amusements; and a general sketch of his personal character, and of the estimation in which he is held by the department. Woe to that person who has given cause for suspicion deserved or undeserved; he will find his movements questioned and impeded at every turn, and will probably end by being turned out of the place if he particularly desires to remain in it, or kept there if he is specially anxious to go. Such a state of things is easily avoided, however, by the simple expedient of giving no cause for suspicion. The Russian police are not unnecessarily prone to suspect every visitor or inhabitant; if satisfied of the innocence of those dwelling under their authority, they never interfere to the annoyance of such citizens; blunders are of rare occurrence. It is seldom, indeed, that an innocent foreigner is arrested under suspicion; the police will know all there is to know about him in a very short space of time granted, but to the law-abiding there is more safety than peril in such a condition of things. One instance of a blunder, and only one, presents itself to my

recollection. This was the case of a young English clergyman, a curate attached to the British church, who had but lately been appointed to his present post, and knew nothing as yet of the Russian language. Being a person of an inquiring disposition, this gentleman was anxious to learn something of the manners and customs of all classes of the great people among whom his lot was cast, and in order to pursue his studies in this department of knowledge, he determined to visit every afternoon the terminus of the Moscow railway, where he would take up a position in the third-class waiting-room, in order to look about him and listen. On the third occasion devoted by him to this innocent recreation, he was accosted by the station police, who considered his conduct suspicious enough to require some sort of explanation, which was therefore forthwith demanded of him. Ignorant of the language as a babe unborn, the poor pastor was quite unable to explain anything, or, indeed, to enunciate a single word; probably he stammered a little in English, or perhaps attempted a few words of what he believed to be French, and looked much flushed and excited over it—a condition of mind which is frequently mistaken for guilt in all countries—whereupon he was promptly arrested.

From the lock-up he was able to communicate with church and embassy, and his release followed quickly upon his identification, together with profuse apologies and explanations. This was a blunder, no doubt; but it was a pardonable one, and was repaired without a moment's delay as soon as discovered.

On the other hand, many instances might be given of the marvellous acuteness of the Russian police in the detection of crime. I will give one. In the employment of a certain foreign firm in St. Petersburg was a Russian clerk who had worked for many years in his situation, and enjoyed the reputation of being an honest man as well as a good worker. One day, to the immense astonishment of the foreign merchant and his staff, the office was visited by a *pristaf*, or chief officer of the police force. This functionary desired to be informed whether the firm had lately been plundered by any member of its staff? The reply, unhesitatingly given, was to the effect that nothing of the sort had happened, or was suspected. Why was the question asked?

The pristaf explained that, though the firm might have felt no uneasiness with regard to the proceedings of their clerk, Mr. V., yet the police had long had their suspicions, and these had culminated in the arrest of

Mr. V. at the railway station that very morning. Would the gentleman kindly give orders that the books of the firm be carefully examined, in order to discover whether any defalcations could be detected? This was done, under a strong expression of protest on the part of the merchant that his best clerk should be thus unworthily suspected; when it was soon found that the firm had been plundered to the extent of upwards of twenty thousand roubles!

Questioned as to how, in the name of all that was mysterious, had the police become aware of defalcations, of the existence of which the firm itself neither knew nor suspected anything whatever, the pristaf explained that the police had long had its eye upon Mr. V., who had seemed to be spending more money than he could be expected to have, as an *employé*, at his disposal. His proceedings had therefore been watched and noted; his champagne suppers were recorded; his boxes at ballet and opera were all scored against him; at last, on the very morning of the pristaf's visit, Mr. V. had been arrested in the act of purchasing a railway ticket to Paris, to a "friend" in which city he had lately made a large remittance. I think this little anecdote, of the accuracy of which I am assured, is a fair example of the really wonderful

acuteness of the detective department of Russian police. The little gorodovoys at the street corners belong to a different order of being altogether; their function is merely to keep the peace in the thoroughfares. They have nothing to do with the inner workings of the intricate police system, which has at its finger-ends every discoverable atom of information about every individual in the empire.

Another familiar type of the streets of St. Petersburg is the *dvornik*, or yard-porter. This individual is an uneducated moujik, but his duties are nevertheless extremely responsible and important in the economy of town life. It is part of his duty, for instance, to look after the passports of all the inmates of the house he serves; sometimes upwards of twenty families occupying the various flats and lodgings over which he is expected to exercise jurisdiction. He is responsible to the police for these passports, and must see that each one is renewed in its season, and that each individual residing in the house is properly provided with the necessary papers, as by law required. Sometimes the dvornik acts as a steward of the landlord, in addition to his other duties, letting the vacant lodgings, receiving the rents, &c. His manual labour is by no means light, for he and his underlings, one or more,

must carry up from the sheds in the yard every stick of firewood burned by the numerous lodgers, having first chopped it into the shape and size required for the stoves. In many of the older houses the water has still to be carted or carried up from the Neva; and this, too, must be done by the much-enduring dvornik and his lieutenants. All this naturally involves a considerable amount of really hard work (a thing no Russian loves!), yet the genial dvornik manages to get his labours finished in good time, in order to spend as much of the day as possible sitting at the front gate, playing or listening to the *garmonka*, a square-shaped concertina much beloved by the lower classes of the population. In addition to the duties above enumerated, the dvornik is expected to assist the street police in keeping order and arresting misdemeanants, which gives him a good excuse for spending so much of his time on the bench by the front gate. In the winter the dvornik sits in his sheepskin showing nothing but an eye, while the garmonka is put away until the return of warmer weather shall have rendered music possible once again. He and his underlings live in a room opening out of the backyard, and not unfrequently the same accommodation has to suffice for his wife and children

as well. The air of this room is simply indescribable, for our friend never dreams of opening his windows from one year's end to another; while the smell of *schee*, a very disgusting soup made of rotten cabbage, is proverbially apt to cling to the precincts in which it is engendered. This schee forms the principal article of diet for soldier, sailor, policeman, apothecary, ploughboy, or, to reduce all to a common denominator, thief; consequently, the prevailing odour of the dvornik's apartment is that of schee, which, mingled with the usual perfume of the Russian moujik, combines to render the air of the place just about as disagreeable to breathe as air can possibly be. It is a curious circumstance, but an undoubted fact, that the Russian moujik actually prefers vitiated air, during the winter, to the real article as God made it; he fancies that frowsy smells conduce to increased warmth; perhaps they do; he ought to know if any one can.

But perhaps the most prominent of all the types common to the streets of St. Petersburg is that excellent creature, the isvoschik. This useful and inimitable personage is represented in dozens at each street corner, where he awaits his natural prey, accosting every passer-by with the same engaging offer to take him anywhere he pleases for the modest remuneration

of fourpence. The isvoschik, or cab-driver, is a species of the animal world without a parallel in this country. His vehicle is not a cab: it is a droshky, a conveyance which must not be confounded with the Berlin carriage of the same name. The Russian droshky was invented by some person of deep but morbid ingenuity, with a special view to the torture of the wretched beings to be temporarily consigned to its tender mercies. It consists of a flat perch behind for the occupant, entirely backless and sideless, and of a flat perch in front for the driver; to stick on the perches while the vehicle jogs and jumps along over the boulders which form the road is a feat requiring much practice, and more than ordinary agility, if not a special monkey-house education. The miserable "fare," who has been jolted to the end of his journey, generally arrives at his destination with his whole supply of bones shaken into his boots, but profoundly grateful for his preservation through the awful experience he has just undergone; an experience which he mentally vows never again to repeat, as with blanched cheeks and dishevelled hair he scrambles off the dreadful vehicle and joyfully regains *terra-firma*. The isvoschik himself must be seen to be appreciated. His garb consists of a long blue kaftan, very like a dressing-gown,

generally patched with portions of a faded predecessor, and surmounted by a huge and greasy fur cap, from beneath which peers the isvoschik.

The individual under discussion belongs to a class which never washes. One isvoschik is said to have been washed on a memorable occasion many years ago; but the experiment proved fatal, and was never repeated. I believe the facts of the case were, that after rubbing the man with soap and scrapers for an hour or two, the experimentalists came upon an old flannel-shirt, the removal of which is said to have caused a violent cold, from which the poor fellow died. I cannot vouch for the truth of this legend: indeed, judging from private observation, I should be inclined to think that no isvoschik can ever, under any circumstances, have been induced to undergo the operation of being washed; but of one thing I am quite certain, and that is, that for lofty contempt of what we are accustomed to call "cleanliness," and general superiority to our insular fads about soap and water, Russians generally, and isvoschiks in particular, soar to heights incredible, and revel in a state of unwashing independence, which renders our finnikin notions by contrast contemptible and petty to a degree.

The isvoschik has, however, other virtues besides

those I have pointed out: he is good-natured to a fault, and is ever ready to treat a fare with that geniality and good-fellowship which we cold islanders are accustomed to reserve for our most intimate friends. The isvoschik may generally be seen, when conveying a fare, turned round with his back to the horse, or nearly so, conversing pleasantly with the individual balanced upon the perch behind. He is holding the reins, of course; but this is a mere formality, and involves no share in the guidance of the intelligent animal in the shafts. The isvoschik never insults the intelligence of his horse by attempting to interfere with its movements; as to taking the right turn—well, animal and master both hope for the best, and follow the droshky next in front; should this turn out to be leading them in a direction foreign to that in which they desire, eventually, to go, it is very easy to stop a mile or two further on, and retrace one's steps. Russians are never in a hurry, and one generally gets to his destination after a while: soon enough, probably, for all practical purposes—what matter if a mile or so of extra ground be covered? As to avoiding collisions and other little details of a similar nature, the horse looks after all that: while as for running over a foot-passenger—that is the foot-passenger's look-

out; besides, no St. Petersburg droshky has ever yet been known to overtake anything, so there is no danger from behind to the most deliberate of pedestrians. The fare is settled by special arrangement before the journey is begun. The isvoschik invariably demands at least twice as much as he will accept, and will in turn appeal to your self-esteem, your charity, and your sense of the ridiculous, while the negotiations are proceeding, in order to induce you to pay a little more than the sum which you know to be sufficient. The intending passenger must, however, be proof to the voice of the charmer, and impervious to the eloquence with which he is certain to be assailed. About fivepence will carry you along until you are half dead, say about a mile and a half; while for a shilling you may travel far enough to break every bone in your body.

I have, I find, referred as yet only to the intellectual side of the character of that noble animal whose duty it is to drag the dreadful vehicle under consideration over the stones. I have not much to say as to its moral qualities; the prevailing trait is, I should say, meekness. The droshky horse does not eat; I dare say it would if it got anything, but then it doesn't; so there's an end of the matter. And this

brings me to its physical aspect, which is indeed a painful subject, and shall not be dwelt upon at any length, lest the feelings of the reader be unnecessarily harrowed. To begin with, judging from those specimens of the craft with whom I have enjoyed personal acquaintance, I should say that no candidate for the post of droshky horse need apply if under half a century old, and that any animal which can drag its aged bones along faster than a mile or so per hour is disqualified by the paternal police; probably in order to obviate the danger which would accrue to passengers in the streets of the metropolis were these independent-minded and uncontrolled creatures encouraged to run about the town at a more rapid rate of progression. The average droshky horse cannot stand still without support; he must either move along or be propped up against a lamp-post; in other respects he is much the same as any ordinary horse—excepting that his front legs are semicircular instead of being straight up and down.

The isvoschik is a popular favourite and has a pet name, Johnnie—the Russian equivalent being "Vainka." He is generally a peasant from some village far away in the interior, whose relatives are able to cultivate the family allotments of land without

his assistance, and have therefore despatched him to the distant metropolis in order to earn a little money for the common purse—his working capital being the old horse which he brings with him, and a few roubles wherewith to purchase the dilapidated tenth-hand droshky and kaftan in which he plies his trade. Occasionally, however, Vainka lends his services to an employer for a wage of seven to eight roubles per month (about fifteen shillings). When engaged thus, he contracts to bring home to his master a stipulated daily sum, generally about 2½ to 3 roubles, as the earnings of horse and droshky; anything under this fixed sum he is obliged to make good: any surplus is his perquisite. In winter, or rather at the first considerable fall of snow, the droshkies disappear and are no more seen (unless an untimely thaw sets in) until March, their place being taken by small sledges just large enough to accommodate two moderate-sized passengers besides the driver. These sledges are not all that is luxurious, nor anything that is clean: but as a contrast and a substitute for the too terrible droshky they are indeed a "sweet boon." I ought to mention that Vainka has an aristocratic relative: the *Lihatch*, whose vehicle, steed, and general appearance are as dissimilar to those of poor Vainka as two

things existing under the common title of isvoschik can very well be. The Lihatch drives a comfortable droshky, running smoothly upon rubber tyres; possesses a stately-looking horse with long flowing tail (a superb trotter as a rule), and wears a spotless kaftan. He is patronised and supported by the gilded youth of St. Petersburg, who remunerate him for his services at a rate at least four or five times in excess of that which poor disreputable-looking Vainka can command. Perched upon the droshky of one of these Lihatch isvoschiks, and flying through the air at a rate of speed which would cause a good English trotter to look on with well-bred surprise, the passenger has considerable difficulty in preserving his equilibrium, and is compelled to hold on tightly to the sides with both hands. But the gilded youth of St. Petersburg does not mind that; *il faut souffrir pour être beau!* Great distinction attaches to him who, in the Russian capital, succeeds in being conveyed through the streets a trifle quicker than his neighbours.

I will conclude this paper with a very brief sketch of the town of St. Petersburg as it appears to the stranger entering it for the first time. Any tourist desiring to obtain a favourable first impression of the city should endeavour to make his entry into it by

water: not by the dreary railway station, which is situated at the very outer edge of the town, and from which he must drive through miles of dismal streets, depressingly dirty and uninteresting, until he reaches the fairer quarters for which he is bound. Let him sail up the Neva from Cronstadt, if possible: thus he will see the city at its best. From far away near Cronstadt he will catch the first glint of golden light flashed from the huge golden dome of St. Isaac's, or perhaps from the tall, slender spire of the church of the fortress, beneath which repose the remains of the imperial Romanofs. In using the term "golden" I do not mean to convey to my readers that these spires are merely gilded; the domes and spires of the principal churches and cathedrals in Russia are actually covered, at enormous expense, with sheets of real gold leaf, which causes them to emit flashes of brilliant light, whose rays reach far and wide over the waters of the Gulf of Finland. If he is not conveyed to the New Port, but is fortunate enough to sail slowly up the Neva as far as the Nicholai bridge, the tourist will enjoy a charming view of the city. On his right he will pass, after leaving behind him the region of the shipbuilding yards, the stately English Quay, a long line of palatial houses, one of which,

surmounted by three figures (representing Hope, Faith, and Charity), is the English church. This quay runs up as far as the Admiralty gardens, where it merges into the Palace Quay, the first building upon which magnificent embankment is the Winter Palace. Beyond this lie miles of palaces all overlooking the Neva, and stretching in an unbroken line to the Liteynaya bridge. Beyond this, again, are the grain wharves: St. Petersburg being a far more important centre for the shipment of all kinds of grain, both to this country and the Continent, than the uninitiated are aware of. Such, briefly, is the right bank of the Neva. On his left hand the tourist, sailing up the river from Cronstadt, will first observe the busy workshops and wharves of Chekooshi: this is the outer portion of the island of "Vassili Ostrof," which forms a considerable proportion of the whole town. It is connected with the mainland by the Nicholai bridge, afore-mentioned. The majority of the numerous British residents live in this same Vassili Ostrof, which can boast of including among its public buildings, the University, the Exchange, the Academy of Arts, and other important edifices. Opposite the Winter Palace is the fortress, whose tall and delicate golden spire I have already mentioned.

From the Alexander gardens, which lie behind the Winter Palace, the far-famed Nefsky Prospect commences its long diagonal course to the monastery, many miles away; the whole of its length, as far as the Moscow railway station, forming one imposing line of palaces and magnificent shops—the great width of this fine street adding immensely to the general effect. The houses are built mostly in four or five storeys, and are let—excepting in the case of the very wealthy classes, who sometimes occupy a whole house—in flats.

At least two circumstances will probably strike the tourist promenading the streets of St. Petersburg for the first time as being peculiar and remarkable: one is, the amazing number of drinking-shops which are able, presumably, to support themselves upon the darling vice of the country; they abound throughout the town; here and there the stranger may count two or three within a few yards. These drinking-shops are of all grades, and to accommodate all classes: they range from the dark and grimy and evil-smelling Kabak of the slums, to the stately Pogreb of the Nefsky Prospect. St. Petersburg is evidently not a stronghold of teetotalism.

The second striking circumstance referred to is the

curious custom, designed, apparently, for the convenience of an uneducated population, of hanging outside the shops enormous pictures representing the wares which are procurable within. Thus the baker displays large posters upon which the cunning artist has depicted clusters of tempting rolls; a dish of cakes piled up in great profusion, and coloured with the most lavish disregard for expense; and a loaf or two of black bread modestly concealing its humble personality in the background. The butcher, again, hangs out the counterfeit presentment of an animal, intended by the artist to impersonate a bull in a pasture field; the terrible animal is apparently filled with sinister intentions, directed against nothing in particular, and is portrayed with head down and tail up, evidently in the very act of charging, but wearing, for all its truculent mien, the mildest aspect and quite a benevolent expression, which says as plain as words: "Don't be afraid, my dears, I wouldn't hurt a fly: it's only my way." The trader who deals in all sorts of linen clothing reveals the facsimile of these without regard to the modesty of the public: while every little jeweller displays the portraits of golden and jewelled wares such as, did he really possess their actual counterpart, would enable him to ransom every crowned head in Europe

if he were desirous of doing this kindness to royalty in distress. The drinking-shop generally presents an extremely realistic poster, showing, besides mugs of impossibly frothy beer and porter creaming up in a manner to tempt the austerest of abstainers, the portrait of an uproariously happy moujik engaged, presumably, in singing, as moujiks love to do, over his vodka, with enough liquor arranged around him, in bottles and decanters of all sizes and shapes, to keep him singing for a fortnight. In a word, each shop, excepting those whose customers are derived from the aristocracy alone, adopts this simple method of making known to the public the nature of articles which may be had for a reasonable equivalent within. The tourist should bear in mind that on entering a Russian shop, however humble, dirty, or stuffy that shop may be, he is expected to remove his hat; and that great offence will be given if he neglects to perform this customary act of courtesy.

As I do not propose to give an exhaustive description of the town of St. Petersburg, but merely the barest of sketches of a few of the types of its inhabitants and their surroundings, I will now draw a curtain over the scene. But let us take one last glimpse, ere the curtain falls, in order to carry away a

general idea of the aspect of the city as it would appear if represented in an instantaneous photograph. There it lies, before our mind's eye, with its great, wide, cobble-paved streets, along which the Lihatch is dashing, and poor vagabond Vainka is for ever crawling in an endless procession from morn till night! Huge stuccoed houses tower in long stately lines down both sides of the roadways; some are painted bright yellow, some a pale blue; green is a favourite colour, and some are a dazzling white; while along the pavement below there flows a ceaseless stream of semi-eastern figures, varied by the admixture of many uniforms, military and civil, and, for St. Petersburg is a cosmopolitan town, many European costumes. The small-sworded gorodovy stands, like a dirty little dignified doll, at the door of his *bootka*, or hut; and the dvornik sits contentedly upon the bench outside his front gate and plays his garmonka to a small and select party of personal friends. In the distance St. Isaac's is flashing its gold rays like a dome of fire, while here, there, and everywhere, scattered in wonderful and pious profusion throughout the city, may be seen other domes and spires: some golden, like St. Isaac's, some bright blue, others green, yellow, and all the colours of the rainbow. In

the midst of all, winding in and out like a silver ribbon, flow the white waters of the Neva, that beautiful river, covered with steamers and ships of all nationalities, and with the high-prowed, gaudily painted *yaliks*, or ferry-boats, peculiar to the country. Clean and sweet, it hastens down between its granite embankments towards the Gulf of Finland: it is indeed a beautiful river, and it flows through a beautiful city! Long may it run its short course from Ladoga to the gulf! and even as its waters wash smooth, as they pass, the granite quay in front of the Winter Palace, so, let all the many well-wishers of Russia devoutly hope and trust, may be smoothed away, in the fulness of time, the unhappy differences between the Tsar and his people! Then shall the river flow through the midst of a contented and happy city, the beautiful metropolis of a contented and happy people.

IV

BUTTER-TIME AND FASTING

During the ten days preceding what to the orthodox Russian is the really severe ordeal of the Great Fast, or Lent, as we know it, all Russia abandons itself to feasting and dissipation, these ten days being known as "Maslenitsa," or "Butter-time." The name is extremely appropriate; for it is indeed a rich and greasy period of pancakes and melted butter and savoury messes such as the Muscovite delights in, but which, once these ten days of indulgence are passed, he may not touch again until the bells of Easter usher in another week of butter and gorging.

During Maslenitsa the towns throughout the empire are filled with visitors from the country, who have come to take their share of the delights provided for them: such as wild sledge-driving through the streets; ice-hilling; visits to the *Balagánui*, or Fairs; together with much eating and drinking, especially of the pancakes afore-mentioned, whose consumption at this

period ranks almost as a religious rite, and is by no means to be neglected.

For the space of the ten days thus given over to feasting and merriment thousands of Finn peasants as well as Russian moujiks are allowed to bring into the towns their small village sledges and ponies and to ply for hire as supernumeraries to the ordinary isvoschiks, who are utterly unable to cope with the enormously increased demand upon their services at this time. No orthodox Russian of the middle or lower classes considers his Maslenitsa to have been worthily spent unless he has chartered one of these semi-amateur conveyances, and, with a party of kindred spirits, raced through the streets of the town as fast as an uproarious Jehu can persuade his staid little Finn pony to drag them. These small but most intelligent animals quite understand that they may with propriety stretch a point during Maslenitsa, and throw off, for one week only, the respectable jog-trot which is their workaday pace, assuming, for the nonce, a little of the abandon which is an integral part of the very atmosphere in Butter-time. I have mentioned the uproarious Jehu as directing the movements of the animal between the shafts; but in point of fact the driving is generally done by one of the party, who

ousts the proprietor from his perch in order to handle the ribbons in his own way, which is generally with his back to the horse. If the proprietor is sober enough he fraternises with the rest of the party in the sledge; if he is too drunk to take his share in the shouting and singing and garmonka-playing of the rest, well, he is used as a footstool or a cushion; while, at the end of the journey, the fare is popped into his pocket as he lies snoring at the bottom of the sledge. As a rule, the Finn peasant isvoschik does not remain sober far into the morning; but then his pony is sober enough for both.

At the *Balagánui* themselves the scene is remarkable indeed. At St. Petersburg a large portion of the immense Champs de Mars is delivered over to the people's use during the carnival, and is covered with enormous wooden theatres, in which rival companies perform every variety of play and pantomime at popular prices. The tragedies, comedies, historical dramas, and farces supplied are, if not bristling with dramatic and literary value, admirably adapted to the requirements of the occasion. The plays last from half an hour to an hour, and immediately after the curtain has fallen upon one performance the house is cleared; another complement of anxious spectators

crowds in and refills every available corner; and the weary actors are dragged forth once again to go through the performance for, perhaps, the fifteenth time in the day. This is hard work, and, considering that very frequently the temperature upon the stage is *below zero*, trying work besides. I have frequently witnessed some poor ballet-dancer, clad in the usual light drapery of the craft, after performing her share of the entertainment, which—violent exercise though it was—did not suffice to keep her scantily-clad body out of the grip of the frost demon, rush to the flies where her attendant stood awaiting her within sight of a large proportion of the audience, and jump instantaneously into the huge *valinki* (long felt boots reaching above the knee), and enormous fur cloak held out ready for her, there to remain for a few warm, blissful moments until her next call condemned her to another spell of pirouetting and semi-freezing. Needless to say, the audience do not divest themselves of their furs and sheep-skins; no cloak-room is required in the *Balagánui*: he who possesses the thickest *shúba* is the best off.

Outside the vast wooden buildings wherein frost and the drama hold divided sway are the usual merry-go-rounds and swings common to the fairs of all

countries, and no less popular among the Tsar's subjects than in this part of the world. But the greatest attraction of the fair, and one to which we in merrie England possess no counterpart, is the ice-hills. Here may be seen a ceaseless procession of small iron sledges, each carrying one passenger besides its guide, flashing like lightning down the steep incline and along the slippery run stretching from the foot of the hill, from morn till night. A special Providence watches over these sledges, and an accident is therefore of the rarest occurrence, which, considering that the guides may be supposed to share in the uproarious "abandon" proper to the season, must be considered, but for the theory of special protection, a very remarkable circumstance indeed. The public are not permitted to attempt a descent alone; each gentleman or lady (for there are as many women as men among the patrons) is obliged to entrust himself or herself to the skill of one of the professional guides. The passenger is directed to sit in the front portion of the sledge, with his feet over the "bows," while the navigator perches himself immediately behind, with his legs anywhere, or nowhere, and guides with his gauntleted hands.

Huge crowds line both sides of the "run," and

roar with delight as each sledge tips over the top of the hill and darts towards them with its shrieking, skirt-flying burden. If a sledge comes to grief and sends its passenger spinning on the bare ice, *coram populo*, the profane crowd howls and yells with exuberant delight all down the line, delight which the anguished expression of the horrified but unhurt victim immensely intensifies, as she spins dishevelled past. The popular national pastime is rarely indulged in by the people excepting during Butter-time, a peculiarity which it shares with the carnival pancakes already referred to. These toothsome morsels appear at every meal during the Maslenitsa period, but are never seen at other times; indeed, the buckwheat flour of which they are made is not easily procured at any other part of the year, though buckwheat meal, or grits, can be had in any quantity. The pancakes are really extremely good; they are about the size of a small saucer, are served very hot, and eaten with fresh butter and a little salt. The orthodox consume them, literally, by scores, especially when "helped down" by dollops of fresh caviare placed between each two, with a liberal supply of the beloved national vodka to make things go easy. A *zakooska*, or appetiser, of raw herring,

salted, is taken occasionally in order to enable the feaster, when symptoms of distress begin to supervene, to work his way through a few more pancakes than nature, unassisted by science, would be equal to.

While upon the heroic subject of herrings and vodka, which often constitute the entire dinner of Russians of the lower classes, I may mention that there is to be seen in a certain restaurant in Moscow, written in large letters upon the wall of the common dining-room, a legend of which the following is a translation: "I ate twelve herrings to one glass of vodka." This is a more remarkable feat for a Russian than would at first sight appear; for salted herrings are thirsty fare, and the Russian is a thirsty soul even without herrings twelve to add a dozen arguments to the promptings of nature. The legend is capped, however, by a second, written just underneath the first; it is to the following effect: "The more fool you! I drank twelve glasses of vodka to one herring!"—a less remarkable but far more Russian feat.

So the delights of Butter carnival run on, from the morning of Sexagesima Sunday until the evening of Shrove Tuesday; and during the whole of

these ten days St. Petersburg is little better than a pandemonium. Sledge-loads of shouting revellers pass down the streets in an endless procession of uproarious happiness; drunken men—never, unfortunately, objects of rarity in holy Russia—lie about the streets in shocking profusion, or stagger homewards full of vinous song; and the peaceful inhabitant is glad indeed when the solemn bells of St. Isaac's proclaim, on the Wednesday morning, that the days of pancakes and of revelling are over and the terrible ordeal of the "Great Fast" has commenced. On that morning not a single one of all the supernumerary Finnish isvoschiks is to be seen in the streets or yards of the town: all have cleared out during the night, as by law compelled, carrying with them nice solid sums of money which will help their families to tide over the rest of the cruel long winter and cold spring, until summer and new crops return, in the nick of time, to save them all alive. The *Balagánui* are dismantled; the theatres, some of them, are being pulled down, while others are left standing until required again for Easter-week, when another Butter-carnival is observed. The ice-hills, too, are left standing if Easter happens to fall early, in the hope that cold weather will last over the Great Festival

(which it rarely does, however!), for then the proprietor will reap a double profit for the once-incurred expense of setting up his hills and laying down his ice-runs: no light matter this, the whole of the framework of the hills being of wood, with wide staircases leading up to the top platform.

No more pancakes are cooked now; no more butter is eaten. The butcher may as well close his shop, save for the trifling business to be done with foreigners and the heterodox, and the invalids who may not, or pretend that they may not fast. The fishmongers will drive a roaring trade; so will the mushroom-sellers and the vendors of "fast-oil," a noxious fluid in which the orthodox are supposed to cook their Lenten victuals, and the smell of which is, to English nostrils, an abomination too deep for words, excepting very wicked ones. During Lent the churches, at other times poorly attended, are thronged with devout worshippers: for of this holy fast-time each orthodox inhabitant who intends to make his Communion at Easter, and there are few who do not, must devote one whole week to the preparation and confession necessary before admission to Holy Sacrament. This week of devotion is known as the *goveying* week, and the orthodox who do not go near

a church for the rest of the year, but are none the less orthodox believers for all that, become the most devout and contrite of worshippers during those seven days. At this time no secular duties whatever, or any secular interest, is allowed to interfere with their complete devotion of this fifty-second portion of the year to their religious duties. Lent is therefore a terrible time for the mistress of a large establishment which includes many servants. Some of these latter must be fed, for six weeks, upon the strictest "fast" diet, all of which is to be cooked in "fast-oil"; others, again, are permitted to "half fast"; others, Finns, perhaps, or Swedes, who are, of course, Protestants, do not fast at all, and will not eat the nastinesses provided for the orthodox. Add to this that the *govey* week may be chosen at will; any one of the Lenten weeks will do so long as one whole one is devoted; and that this devotion implies remission of all duties at home during the period devoted. Several of her servants are sure to select the same seven days for their *goveying*—the last week or two being, as a rule, the favourite for this purpose, though there is generally some one in the house *goveying*, so that the discipline and comfort of the establishment naturally goes by the board,. and the family is obliged to live in more or less discomfort

during the entire six weeks. The British householder will thoroughly understand how, at such times, nothing can go possibly right in an establishment and yet no individual servant be to blame: for if fault is found, the excuse is obvious: it was Ivan's business to do this, and he is *goveying*. A hideous aggravation to the discomfort of it all is the really dreadful smell of fast-oil, which, once used, permeates every corner of the largest house with its odour of sanctity.

Outside everything is dull, even funereal. Nothing in the way of amusements is going on; theatres and operas are closed; parties and dances are not so much as spoken of; the Fast is a real fast, and there is no compromise. Any innocent enjoyment must be indulged in *sub rosâ*. As to the exact proportion of real sincerity about all this fasting and show of religious contrition, I should think, on the whole, that there is a far larger share of honest religious feeling in it than those who are personally unacquainted with the people of Russia would easily believe. The great majority of orthodox Russians, good, simple souls who never for a moment question the articles of the faith in which they have been born and bred, are undoubtedly perfectly sincere in their Lenten devotions and abstentions. That the Muscovites are a

deeply religious people is apparent to the observer at every turn, and at every moment. Without considering what proportion of their so-called religion is in reality mere superstition, it is clear that to the average Russian mind the idea of an ever-present and Almighty power is a central consideration in everyday life. As an instance, no Russian will think of entering a room without first turning his eyes to the small *obraz*, or ikon, in the corner, crossing himself and muttering a prayer. This may have degenerated into a perfunctory habit, but an orthodox Russian would be terribly shocked were he told that he might as well omit the observance, for he recognises it as his first duty and as in a way insuring himself by bringing down a benediction upon the result of his business in the room entered, whatever that business may be. Again, our Russian will ask a blessing on every trivial undertaking before embarking upon it; calling familiarly upon Providence as a matter of course a hundred times during the day. He will cross himself and pray when entering a carriage or a train, when hearing of death or calamity, when about to bathe, eat, sleep. He will bless his friend at departing; the ordinary salutation to one working in the fields is, "God be your help." His "thank you" is

generally expressed by the words, "God give you health."

In a word, Ivan Ivanovitch takes his religion with him wherever he goes; it is an integral part of his daily life, not a thing to be put away during the week and trotted out on Sundays with the best coat and hat; he draws upon it at all and every moment, as the most natural thing to do. This sort of thing becomes a habit, no doubt; but there must surely be a solidity about a man's ideas as to religion and its uses before he can habituate himself to using it, as Ivan does, as a constant fund upon which he may draw at any moment, when in need of moral support.

As a rule, the final thaw sets in during the Long Fast, and this makes the aspect of things even more dismal and funereal than before. The roads for a few days are impassable; for the sledge-track is broken up as soon as the thaw shows signs of being the final collapse of winter, and the process of breaking it up is a somewhat lengthy one. Beneath the few inches of snow or mud which form the surface of a sledge-track is a hard stratum of dirty snow trodden into an icy mass, which must be broken up with picks and carted away before the summer road, formed of cobbles, is reached; hence for a few days locomotion

is a misery, whether on wheels or runners: the isvoschiks being about equally divided as to whether sledge or droshky is the more fitting mode of conveying the tortured passenger under the distressing circumstances I have indicated. My advice to the British tourist, should he be so unfortunate as to find himself in the position of being obliged to make this choice of evils, is to stick to the sledge as long as he can find one plying; for droshkies, even under the most favourable circumstances, are detestable engines of torture, and during the few days of broken-up road they are an abomination too horrible to describe. If the tourist tries it, only once, he will find it quite sufficient to provide him with food for painful recollection all the rest of his life; and when he has a nightmare, the nocturnal steed will invariably be harnessed to that droshky, and will drag him night-long over those broken roads. Therefore be wise, gentle tourist: choose the sledge, or, still better—walk.

The river, covered up to now with a pure white shroud of snow and a coffin-lid of four or five feet of ice, begins during Lent to look grey, then almost black, then wet and perforated and spongy. Finally, generally about half way through April, being at

length ready for a move, one fine day the whole surface of ice suddenly "ups anchor" and sails slowly away seawards; the wooden bridges are quickly unshipped and slung alongside the quay, and the great mass (whose pressure, if it were to encounter resistance, would amount to millions and millions of tons) journeys slowly and majestically along with the current, unimpeded save by the enormous stone ice-breakers protecting the Nicholai and Liteynaya permanent bridges, towards the wider waters of the Gulf of Finland—there to sojourn a while, dispersed into thousands of miniature icebergs, until the last vestige sinks or is melted away. It is a most imposing and unique sight when the Neva thus shakes herself free from the frost king in whose clutches she has so long been captive, and carries away her chains on her broad back, to be "shot," like rubbish, into the sea. The disappearance of the ice makes a wonderful change in the temperature of the atmosphere; a balmy, spring-like feeling is at once discernible in the air, which up to now, however warmly the sun may have shone, had preserved its icy, *northern* character. During the passage of the Neva ice, a man or a dog is occasionally to be seen being carried away upon the moving mass, the sight naturally causing the

intensest excitement among the spectators: generally the individual thus providing gratuitous entertainment for his fellow-townsmen is eventually rescued if not *too* drunk; that he is more or less so is a matter of course, for if otherwise he would not be there; if, then, he is sober enough to keep his head and listen to the instructions shouted freely to him by the spectators, who point out the safest blocks of ice upon whose backs he may scramble to shore, he may easily save himself. Dogs are frequently carried away to sea and lost. As an instance of the thick-headedness of that jack-in-office, the town policeman, or gorodovoy, I may mention the following circumstance, for the absolute and unvarnished truth of which I can vouch. On one occasion, just after the ice had begun to move, a disciple of Bacchus was suddenly descried stumbling across the unstable roadway afforded by the slowly floating mass of ice. He had been accustomed to cross the river at this spot, and was not in a condition to observe the rude barricades erected to inform would-be passengers that the crossing was no longer safe. Having therefore surmounted the obstruction he was now embarked upon his perilous journey. The genial soul was not in the least alarmed, however, doubtless supposing that the insecurity of his footing

was caused, not by any movement of the "ground" beneath his feet, but by his own deplorable, though familiar, condition. He had often experienced this sensation before: pavements frequently seemed to move beneath one's feet: it was nothing. The special Providence which is the recognised friend of drunken men brought him safely, amid a scene of tremendous excitement, to the point on the opposite side of the river towards which he had steered, and where a large crowd, among whom stood the gorodovoy aforementioned, had collected to watch the sensational episode. On the arrival of the traveller, however, the minion of the law delivered himself of the following:—

"How dare you cross the river while the ice is moving? Idiot! don't you know it is forbidden to do so? I have no authority to allow you to land here while the ice is in motion; go back at once, and come round by the bridge, as the authorities demand!"

And back went the reveller, perfectly contented to obey so simple a request, escorted once again by that special Providence in whose good offices he had long since acquired, by constant use, a vested interest. A sober man would undoubtedly have been drowned, but our Bacchanalian staggered, floundered, and

pounded along with impunity, and eventually reached his original starting-point in perfect safety and without the slightest suspicion that he had twice performed a most dangerous feat, such as the boldest and soberest might shrink to essay!

But the longest night must end in morning at last, and the dark days of Lent with its *goveying* and fasting, its evil-smelling oils, its thaws and its general sense of discomfort and misery and contrition and depression disappear, at length, in the joyous dawning of the Easter Festival. This is the great day of the year, far greater both as an ecclesiastical red-letter day and as a popular holiday than Christmas. The observance of the festival commences on the Saturday evening, and the neighbourhood of a Russian church (at about nine o'clock on the eve of Easter) presents a scene of extraordinary bustle and excitement. The whole town is on its way to church; sinners and saints, gentlemen and apothecaries, ploughboys and thieves, are all bent upon one errand; no one thinks of remaining at home this evening, no one but an occasional cook, left in charge to put a finishing touch to the stupendous meal, or *gorge*, with which every orthodox inhabitant is destined to inaugurate his Easter festivities, and celebrate the end of his long

fast on return from church at about one o'clock in the morning.

The stampede to church commences, as I have said, at about nine o'clock. Each person on entering the sacred building is accommodated, at the charge of a few kopecks, with a long wax candle, which he proceeds to light, and which he holds in his hand from this time till the end of the service, dropping the grease steadily and impartially all over his own or his neighbour's clothes the while, and occasionally setting fire to some unsuspecting individual from behind. As a rule the worshipper who has thus been "lighted" is speedily put out by the thronging crowds around him, but fatal accidents have occasionally been known. By ten o'clock the churches are crammed quite full, and at this time the appearance of the interior of a cathedral like St. Isaac's in St. Petersburg is most impressive. The immense nave, crowded with its dense mass of human beings, and entirely unlighted save for the glimmering tapers held by each person, seems to surge slowly backwards and forwards as the congregation sways to and fro, while no sound breaks the silence save an occasional groan or scream from some crushed or ignited worshipper.

But suddenly, from the holy place behind the

altar, there advances a solemn procession; the metropolitan is of course the chief figure, and his appearance as he moves forward in all the glory of his magnificent vestments and mitre, flashing with innumerable and absolutely priceless gems, is indeed imposing. The choir follows the procession of metropolitan, bishops, and high clergy, and to the solemn music appointed for the service these pillars of the Church advance to the reserved space in the centre of the nave, and there perform what to the stranger's eyes is a most astonishing and wonderful function. It consists chiefly of much bowing on the part of the chief priests towards one another and towards the congregation, accompanied by great swinging of censers and much monotonous, though solemn music. At about half-past eleven o'clock commences what may be considered the most essential portion of the service, and a most interesting and impressive function it is.

In one corner of the cathedral is a large stone coffin, and it is this which acts the central part of the religious play which is now about to be performed. Metropolitan, bishops, priests, choir, and a portion of the congregation, slowly march in procession towards the spot indicated above, which is supposed

to represent the tomb of the Saviour. On reaching this place the coffin is discovered to be empty, the discovery being timed for twelve o'clock. At the first stroke of midnight, which heralds of course the arrival of Easter morning, jets of light suddenly appear in all parts of the vast building, flitting mysteriously through the air, creeping up and up till they reach the long lines of gas burners which overtop every arch and pillar and column. Almost simultaneously every chandelier and every burner in the cathedral starts into luminous prominence, till thousands of bright jets reveal the crowds below, the ikons hung around the walls blazing with priceless jewels, which reflect back the light, the wonderful pillars of malachite and lapis lazuli, and the beautiful figures of our Lord and the Apostles which are fixed to the wall on each side of the golden gate leading to the holy place: pictures which are many times larger than life-size, and look as though they were beautiful paintings, but which are in reality the finest mosaic. At the same instant every church bell in the town peals out, and the choir bursts into jubilant strains, of which the burden is "Christ is risen," while every individual in the great building falls on his knees with many times repeated signs of the cross as the Proces-

sion of bishops and priests passes, more hurriedly now, out of the great west gate, only opened once a year, to tell the world that "He is risen!"

"Christ is risen," cries the metropolitan, right and left to the multitude. "He is risen indeed," replies every individual, and bishops and priests move first round the outside of the edifice, and then in every direction through the surging masses within, sprinkling holy water on all sides, repeating the formula, "Christ is risen," and receiving the orthodox reply. This concludes the function, but all who are fortunate enough to press forward into the first rank may kiss and be kissed by the metropolitan as he stands upon a step of the chancel for a limited space of time.

Then the crowds disperse; the religious observances —sensational but sincere—are over; abstinence is also over, and as the picture of the Russian enjoying himself at supper after a six weeks' fast is not an agreeable one, we will draw a curtain over this portion of the proceedings. A visit to the nearest pig-sty at feeding-time will afford to the curious a fairly accurate idea of the Muscovitus domesticus *gorgax*. I will only add that for the next few weeks acquaintances meeting in street or house, for the first time after Easter, interchange kisses, the kisses being given and taken

with the accompanying salutation "Christ is risen!" (Christos Voskres!), and the invariable reply, "He is risen indeed" (Vóistino Voskrés"). Hard-boiled eggs dyed all colours are also interchanged. The practice of kissing one another at Easter, which dates of course from very early Christian times, is observed by all classes without distinction; for instance, it is not considered a liberty for the servants of a middle-class household, male and female, to exchange kisses with their mistress on this occasion. It is a common sight to see a couple of dirty moujiks stop and kiss one another in the streets, or to observe a pair of still dirtier cab-drivers jump down from their perches, revealing their patchy but patriarchal costume, in order to embrace in the orthodox fashion. Whether the practice of this rite is conscientiously observed by the gay Muscovite youths and the fair Muscovite maidens must be left to the judgment of the reader; but I think we may hope that they, too, are orthodox!

I have recorded above that a second Butter week is observed during the seven days immediately succeeding the church functions just described. The *Balagánui* are open once more; merry-go-rounds are in motion and filled with noisy revellers; the sensational dramas within the booths are again in full

swing: the ballet-dancer trips her mazy way across a stage whose temperature is now better adapted to the peculiarities of her costume; the town is given over once more to the demons of noise and revelry and abandon; high-pressure piety has had its day; religion has received its fifty-second share of Holy Russia's undivided attention, and—to slightly alter Hamlet—"The rest is—noise!"

V

A BLACKCOCK TOURNAMENT

MANY of my readers have doubtless made the acquaintance of old Mr. Blackcock as a grass widower upon the moors, and have perhaps occasionally happened upon Mrs. Greyhen and the little ones during their humdrum family life in the covey period. Those who have thus met with the members of the family will probably agree with me that the blackcock during the shooting season is not a highly original or entertaining creature. The old cock bird exhibits no domestic virtues whatever. Indeed, he lives the most selfish and solitary life possible during the whole of the summer and autumn months, neglecting his family entirely, and giving them no paternal hints as to the proper methods of deluding the sportsman, such as leading his dogs to the verge of distraction by running, and then rising just four feet beyond the utmost range of his choke-bore. The family does not, as a rule, learn these arts at the

hands of its natural guide. It has to learn them by bitter experience and by the loss of several of its members. For nothing can exceed the guileless simplicity and trustfulness with which a young covey of black game personally conducted by the maternal relative (who ought to know better) will rise under the very nose of the sportsman, not *en famille*, but one by one, lest the gentleman with the gun should not be able to use his weapon to the greatest advantage. I have many times seen coveys of full-grown black game behave in the suicidal way I have just indicated, and it has led me to the conclusion that, during the summer at all events, the blackcock family is dull, uninteresting, and wanting in that "go" and spirit which many of its cousins show in a marked degree. And yet at other seasons of the year there is no bird whose habits are more interesting and entertaining to any observer fortunate in the opportunity of witnessing them. The blackcock abounds in Russia, and it is in that country that I have been enabled to learn certain of his ways, a description of which may possibly be of interest to my readers. The conditions of sport are in Russia so different from those in vogue in this country that possibly to many English sportsmen what I have to describe may be a

revelation of things undreamed of. For instance, who would imagine that the blackcock tribe hold, during the spring pairing season, regularly organised tournaments for the edification of the ladies of the family, who sit around, not indeed in galleries erected for the purpose, but securely hidden from view in Nature's gallery, the cover around, whence they keep a sharp look-out upon the doings of the gentlemen, mating afterwards with the warrior whose prowess, or whose "bounce," has most captivated them? And yet this is the commonest sight on the moors near the forests every day during March and April at early morning. I have said that the conditions of sport in Russia are entirely different from those recognised in this country. In Russia the close time for game begins in May and lasts until July 15 (27), consequently blackcock may be shot in April, and the proper way and time to shoot him at that season is, according to Russian ideas, during the hour or two that he is busily employed upon the tourney-ground. When I add that the wretched creature must be shot on the ground, from an ambush, I can imagine my reader turning from the tale in contempt and loathing. But let me hasten to assure such that I cordially agree with him in his contempt for such "sport." But, being in

Russia, and resolved, for the sake of experience, to do as the Russians did, I was tempted and fell. In a word, I went and sat in an ambush and "potted" a blackcock on the ground. And now, having made my confession, I will endeavour to describe things as they were, in order that others may have the benefit of my experience without the accompanying burden of guilt which lies upon my sportsman's soul. I must be allowed to say that I objected entirely, at first, to being taken out blackcock shooting in April; but my host assured me that "everybody did it," and that I might, if I liked, sit and watch the fun without firing off my gun, which was very true.

Under these circumstances I determined to swallow my disinclination, and journey down to Niasino with my friend, in order to see for myself wherein could possibly lie the amusement of spending a cold Russian night in the midst of the forest, with no better object in view than that of "potting" a wretched blackcock or two on the ground. And here I may as well record once for all the fact that I never made a greater mistake in my life, for the experience I was about to pass through proved to be in many ways one of the most delightful it is possible to imagine, not so much from the point of view of the sportsman as

from that of the naturalist and lover of animal life. It was a long journey from St. Petersburg to Niasino, nearly seventy *versts*, or something like fifty English miles; and the roads!—well, I have called them roads out of courtesy to a country which has afforded me many a day's hospitality, and to which I am proportionately grateful, but the term is misleading. The winter had lately broken up, and there was too little snow to enable sledges to run, but too much slush and rotten ice to allow of wheeled vehicles passing. Consequently we were obliged to mount the small Finnish ponies of the country, little animals with backbones which would not be denied, but made themselves disagreeably conspicuous through any amount of padding placed beneath the saddle. As for our luggage and guns, they followed as best they could in a cart drawn by three ponies abreast, and driven by a wretched peasant whose position on the box must have been disagreeable in the extreme, not to say perilous, for he was jerked about, up and down, and from side to side, in a way which must have reminded him of "popped corn."

I think it was five or six hours that my friend and I passed jogging along on the top of those ponies. They required no guidance—in fact, they picked

their way far better without our interference, and whenever a fairly good stretch of road came they did not require to be reminded that here was an opportunity to push on—they knew it themselves, and spurted gamely as long as the good road lasted. Through long stretches of bare, hungry-looking country we jogged, the snow lying in patches and alternating with strips of black earth. Now and again we traversed a village, each one the exact counterpart of the last, and all apparently deserted save for a few wild-looking boys and girls, who rushed out of the huts as we passed to gaze at us in silence until we disappeared. Here and there we rode through the skirts of the forest, where the snow still lay in deep rifts which showed innumerable tracks of hares, crossing and recrossing one another, with now and then the larger footprints of Mr. Fox and occasional indications of the august presence of Mr. Wolf. These latter tracks were, however, very rare, and the sight of them filled me with pleasurable excitement. However, as A—— pointed out, the snow had been there for days and perhaps weeks, and the wolves might be miles away by this time, so that it was useless to think of them. I sighed, but accepted the inevitable and resumed my jogging. The ponies knew well

enough where they were bound for, and on reaching the end of the last belt of forest, which opened out into a vast moor, they pricked up their ears and "did" the remaining couple of miles at a hand-gallop.

The hut at which we were to put up belonged to a keeper, one Solomón, and consisted of two rooms—one being the family living room, and the other being reserved for grand occasions such as the present. It was nearly all stove, a great square brick structure reaching nearly up to the ceiling and half-way across the room. A continuous bench ran all round the walls, and a table stood in one corner. This comprised the furniture. Any one wishing to sleep was expected to clamber up to the top of the stove, or stretch himself (or as much of himself as the narrow space would permit) upon the bench.

However, we had not come to sleep but to have our supper and sally forth without any more delay than that necessary formality would entail. Solomón and another keeper, Lákoo, were waiting for us, and while we discussed the good things which A—— had brought they informed us that each had found a superb *tok*, or blackcock tourney-ground, and had built a *shalashka* in readiness for us. A *shalashka*, I may explain, is a tiny conical tent made of fir-boughs

meeting at the top, and spreading outwards below wide enough to form a circular hiding-place wherein two men can lie uncomfortably, or sit with moderate comfort. The ground—which is ice, beaten snow, or mud and water, according to the season—is well floored with straw. The keeper, having discovered (by haunting the woods at night) exactly where the blackcock hold their nightly *tok*, marks the spot and returns in daylight when the birds have dispersed in order to build the *shalashka* for the accommodation of the sportsman.

Supper finished, my friend and I tossed up for keepers, fortune placing me in Solomón's hands. A—— explained that we must set out at once, though it was but ten o'clock, because the first few hours of night must be passed in the forest near our *shalashki*, in order that we might not disturb the game by tramping through the cover towards dawn. The blackcock would not assemble until about half-past two, but we might light a fire in the forest, and sleep by it until one o'clock or so with perfect impunity, so long as we extinguished the flames and slipped into our *shalashki* before two.

So off we went, on foot, through the woods. It was a splendid night, freezing hard—not far from

zero—but fine, and with a sky full of stars over our heads. We had a mile to walk before we reached the edge of the wood close to the open space where the *shalashki* were built, and a mile's walk through those snow-drifts was no child's play, burdened as we were with guns, *polooshubki* (sheepskin coats), and rugs, not to mention kettles for boiling tea. We were not to converse for fear of disturbing slumbering black-cock warriors, and as we pounded along, now floundering in a snow-drift up to our waists, now plunging deep into a pool of water but half covered with rotten ice, and all in dead silence, I could not help feeling as if I was going through some mysterious forest land in a dream, and that I should wake in a minute to find myself in bed. The silence and darkness and mystery of the night were so new to me. At last Solomón, who led the way, stopped, placed his finger on his lips, and pointed to the earth close to his feet. There I soon perceived a large pile of dead boughs and twigs prepared for lighting, and in a very few minutes we were all four seated or stretched out before a splendid blazing fire. Not a word was spoken, however, and the crackling of the twigs and singing of the kettles was all the sound to be heard. A—— and the keepers drank their tea, and promptly

prepared themselves for a nap, whispering me to do the same.

But having once arrived in fairyland I was not going to waste the precious moments in sleeping. Oh no! I should lie down and stare at the nodding pine boughs, and watch their delicate tracery against the sky. Perhaps some of the innumerable nymphs and spirits which people the forest might wander in my direction; or at least a wolf, or a bear, or perhaps a lynx would creep up towards the firelight to see what the unusual glare might portend, and whether there was any good eating to be done in connection with it. So I lay awake and dreamed, and listened to the perfect silence. How sublime it was, and yet how absolutely reposeful! Could it really be that I had lived on God's earth for more than a quarter of a century and yet never known until this moment what repose really meant? Not a breath of wind moved. The smoke of the fire rose in a long straight column until it thinned and dispersed far away in the heights. There was not a sound to be heard (I beg Lákoo's pardon, he snored at intervals like a trooper), and my soul was satisfied. How long I lay and dreamed in this perfectly peaceful and blissful condition I do not know, but suddenly

there broke the silence a very weird and startling sound. It was like a loud laugh followed by the syllable *kiwow*, three or four times repeated. Solomón and Lákoo instantly started to their feet, yawned, and scratched their heads. The Finn peasant never does or says anything without previously taking off his cap and scratching his head. Having then performed this *sine quâ non*, Solomón sagely nodded and whispered, "It's time!"

At this instant the startling laugh rang out once more. A—— jumped up wide awake, and I looked at him and the keepers in order to see terror, or at least excitement, appear in their countenances; but to my surprise not one of them took any notice of the ghostly cry. "What on earth was that noise?" I asked A—— at length. "That?" said A——, whispering; "oh, only a willow-grouse; he's always the first up in the mornings, and crows like that once or twice, an hour before anything else is moving, after which effort he rests again for an hour before commencing seriously his day's work." But we must be off, A—— and Lákoo in one direction to their *shalashka* half a mile distant, Solomón and I to ours, which was but a couple of hundred yards away. It was still pitch dark, the time 1.30 A.M.; the frost seemed

to be relaxing, and the stars were hidden here and there with patches of light clouds. We heard A—— and Lákoo trudge away through the trees, the sound of their floundering footsteps being marvellously distinct even at a distance in the intense silence. Then we started. We were at the extreme edge of the forest, and before we had walked forty yards I could see that we were clear of the trees and making our way, Solomón leading, across an open plain, covered with ice and patches of snow, and with here and there a low scrubby bush or a small plantation of long yellow grass sticking up out of the ice. I judged rightly that this was a boggy open surrounded by forest, and that the ground was probably wet and spongy in spring and summer. How Solomón ever found that *shalashka* in the pitch darkness has ever been a mystery to me. He went as straight as a line across the open, I following at my best pace. Once a pair of birds rose at my feet and whizzed away into the black air before us. They were ducks, I could tell by the musical sound of their flight; but what the deluded creatures were doing there I cannot imagine, for the ice was two or three inches in thickness. Probably they had alighted at nightfall in a place which they had formerly known as a swamp,

and had been too much taken aback by its metamorphosis into an ice-plain to have the energy to move on further. But here is the *shalashka* just visible five yards from us. Solomón removed the small fir boughs with which one side had been padded, making a hole large enough for us to creep in. Inside, though the accommodation was exceedingly limited, it was comfortable enough, and the thickly piled straw made a very acceptable lounge. Solomón thought so too, for he promptly lay down, and in a couple of minutes his snores were making night hideous. As for me, I wrapped my *polooshubka* and rugs about me, for the air "bit shrewdly," and composed myself for another dream. I had been a bit of a poet in my younger days, and though I thought I had grown out of the weakness I found on this occasion that the microbes were still in the system, and that I must take care of myself or I should suffer from another attack of the old complaint. I believe I had begun to worry out an "Ode to Night," or something equally preposterous, when luckily the Angel Sleep had pity upon me, and chased away the noxious inclination to rhyme by covering me and my poetic fancies and fervour in her mantle of soft insensibility.

Suddenly a sound awoke me. Solomón's hand was on my knee as I started into a sitting posture, and his finger was on his lip.

What was it? I soon recognised the sound; it was that of a large bird flying through the air close to us—now it settled with a thud, not more than ten yards from the *shalashka*.

"That's the king of the *tok*," Solomón whispered, scarcely audibly; "he's quite close; you can't see him yet, but listen!" The next moment I heard this cry: *Choowish—choowish—chuwoo-i-i*, followed by a crooning sound much resembling that of doves, but far louder. This was the first challenge, from the throat of the blackcock king. Solomón hastened to explain that I must never, under any circumstances, shoot the first challenger, or king of the *tok*, because if I were to do so there would be no *tok* held, his majesty being the chief mover and organiser of the whole business, which would fall through without his exertions. The next minute the air was filled with the sound of powerful wings whirring through it, followed by thuds as the blackcock champions arrived and alighted in all parts of the tourney-ground, ready to accept the king's challenge, and to hurl back their own both at him and at each other. "*Choowish*"

sounded in every direction, far and near; while the intense vibration of the air caused by so many blackcock throats crooning at once was positively disagreeable. The king was still at it, as hard as any, and I strained my eyes in his direction. All I could distinguish, however, was a glint of white, which I discovered afterwards to be the white feathers below the tail, which the blackcock displays as he struts defiantly about with his head down and tail up, much after the fashion of the barndoor cock in any yard. I must confess that at this stage of the proceedings my heart was all of a throb with excitement. It was so delightfully tantalising to think that here were perhaps forty or fifty blackcock all standing or stalking about within fifty yards of me, and I could not see one of them! Meanwhile the *kooropatka*, or willow-grouse, was hard at it, laughing away at the top of his voice in all directions. In addition to this I could hear in the distance a strange sound which I afterwards discovered to proceed from capercailzies, which birds hold a *tok* of their own in the midst of the forest. A snipe was wheeling backwards and forwards high in the air over my head, emitting a sound exactly like the baa of a small sheep. Far away I heard the whistle of a tree-partridge, and from

still further away came a most melancholy howling—the very dismalest sound I had ever heard. This was a hungry wolf, singing for his supper. As he stopped howling shortly afterwards, I concluded that he had either caught a hare or helped himself to a dog from some neighbouring village yard. But at last it was growing slowly but perceptibly lighter. It was three o'clock. By staring till my eyes watered I could just make out, here and there, motionless black forms, each with a speck or two of white showing clearly against the more sombre colours, and I fixed my particular attention upon two birds which faced each other, as I rightly guessed, upon the ground some fifteen paces from my *shalashka*. It was still far too dark to shoot (I had determined to murder one bird), but I could watch. Both of my warriors were very noisy. They were standing motionless about a yard apart, their heads very low, their tails spread wide and fan-like behind and over them. Both were crooning. Occasionally one would utter the challenge, "*choowish*," which was instantly responded to by his antagonist. As it grew lighter Solomón became very much excited. He jogged my arm. "*Strelyai!*" (shoot!) he whispered angrily. I took my gun, but not because I intended to commit my murder just

yet; the fact was, I was afraid that Solomón would, in his excitement, seize the gun if I did not, and shoot either me or the blackcock. I was determined to watch the fun before I spoiled it by shooting. And now my opinion as to the prowess and gallantry of the blackcock began to undergo the change which has resulted in the sad conclusion that that bird, for all his bounce and *tok* and challenging and general show-off, is a humbug and a take-in.

So far as I saw on that morning and on several subsequent occasions, the knights of the blackcock *tok* never get beyond the challenging stage. They stand facing one another, thinking unutterable things, doubtless, and occasionally venting their hatred and defiance in the syllable *choowish*, but no sooner does one jump a foot into the air, as though to attack his adversary and bring matters to a climax, than the other does the same. This seems to discourage the first hero, who resumes his motionless position as before. After a few more minutes spent in bragging and crooning, one will advance a foot or so towards his antagonist, who promptly retires a corresponding distance, advancing in his turn the next moment, and causing the foe to retreat. It was ludicrous, and I should think the ladies of the family, who looked on

at this see-saw business from the seclusion of the bushes around, must have formed a very poor opinion of the courage of their lords; I know I did.

Indeed, so disgusted was I with the empty bounce of these hectoring triflers that I determined to rid the world of one or both, lest their example should be seen and followed by younger blackcock knights as yet unversed in the ways of humbug. So I hardened my heart, and gently putting aside a twig or two in order to get the end of the barrel through the side of the *shalashka*, I raised the gun, with difficulty sighted the nearer of the two blackcock, and pulled the trigger. . . . For a minute after the report, which sounded deafening, there was absolute silence. Not a bird crooned near or far off, not a challenge was to be heard. The plain might have been as destitute of blackcock as Hyde Park. But when the smoke cleared away what was my surprise to observe that not a single one of all the warriors present had flown! Nor was their silence of long duration—indeed, hardly had the atmosphere cleared sufficiently for me to see that my murdered blackcock lay motionless at the feet of his late adversary, when the latter hero, evidently imagining that he had, with exceedingly little trouble, slain his enemy, gave forth a most

strident *choowish*, which was instantly responded to from all parts of the battlefield, and the crooning and crowing were, in a moment, in full swing once more. There were several blackcock within easy shot, but I was not going to murder another in cold blood. One actually came and settled on the top of my *shalashka*, and Solomón nearly assaulted me in his rage because I would not raise my gun and blow it to pieces. To make a long story short, the tournament continued as it had begun, with much swaggering, a great amount of hectoring and swearing among the knights engaged, but no bloodshed. I have been told that fights to the death occasionally take place, but I have never seen a blow struck. Meanwhile, as it became lighter I saw several sights which made my heart rejoice. I saw a beautiful willow-grouse, brown and white, chasing his mate and dallying with her in the prettiest way. He it was who had given forth the first weird laugh which had so startled me, and he kept up his laughing cry from half-past two until nearly four with hardly a break, the hen-bird always responding with her *kiwow*. I saw a beautiful fox steal across the plain, trying to stalk a blackcock. The birds all saw him at once, and accentuated the fact by preserving a dead silence all over the field for

a few seconds. He did not get his blackcock for breakfast that morning, and disappeared in the forest. And once—oh, the joy of it!—a bull elk followed by two cows and a year-old calf trotted slowly across, his splendid head well back on his shoulders and his legs stepping out in perfect style. These, too, reached the edge of the forest and disappeared. A friend once informed me that upon one occasion, as he sat in his *shalashka* at a blackcock *tok*, he was surprised to observe that all the blackcock present suddenly took flight and left the field. As he sat and wondered what could have caused this sudden exodus, the reason for their alarm in the shape of a large bear abruptly made its appearance, steering straight down upon the *shalashka*. Having only small shot with him (No. 4), my friend did not quite know what to do; but as the bear showed unmistakable signs of his intention to investigate the *shalashka* and its contents, he thought he had better see what a little intimidation would do, so he fired off his gun over the beast's head. The wisdom of this move was evident, for no sooner had the smoke cleared than Mr. Bruin was observed in full retreat, galloping off towards the forest as though he had to catch a train.

But to return to my *tok*. The sun now began to

show signs of rising. A pink glow gradually overspread the horizon. Now and again a greyhen would rise from the bushes near and fly off towards the dense forest, when one or two blackcock would promptly lay down their arms and follow her. This gave me an idea. I watched a few of those nearest to me, and determined that when they rose to fly I would shoot. This, I considered, would be fair play. In this way I shot three or four beautiful specimens, much to Solomón's relief, who had begun to think me a very poor sort of fellow, and sat sulkily smoking his long Finnish pipe, and looking as if he thought strangling would be the best thing to be done with me, and as though he would not mind the job himself.

But all things must come to an end in their season, and when the sun showed his fiery forehead above the horizon silence instantly fell upon plain and wood. The blackcock ceased their crooning, the willow-grouse his laughter; the distant capercailzie was heard no more. One by one the blackcock had disappeared, and the few now remaining stayed but a short while to "trim their jetty wings" and preen their beautiful feathers after the ruffling business of the *tok*. Then these disappeared, and Solomón and I were left

alone, the sole living occupants of the tourney-ground. Gladly I stepped out and stretched my stiffened limbs, and walked about to find and pick up my slaughtered blackcock knights. They were beauties, in the glory of their spring plumage, and the sheen of their lovely necks and backs, and the brilliant red of their eyebrows, was a thing to see once and remember always.

As to the morality of shooting blackcock in spring, my friend A—— assured me that it was absolutely necessary to keep down the males, these being far more numerous than the females. He added that, in consequence of this latter fact, it frequently happens that two or three cocks will compete for the favours of one hen, and in doing so will quarrel over the nest and smash all her eggs. This, he explained, is why it is not considered unsportsmanlike in Russia to "pot" blackcock on the ground during their spring tournaments. The willow-grouse are never shot in the spring, because these birds, having chosen a mate, are faithful to her, stay with her, assist to hatch and rear the brood, and spend the summer with the covey. The old blackcock is a bad husband and a worse father, and very unlike the willow-grouse in these respects; hence his tragic fate at the *tok*.

Before bringing this chapter to a close I must de-

scribe one more interesting characteristic of blackcock life. During the late autumn black game of both sexes pack into large companies of many scores of birds. These packs may frequently be seen sitting, like a number of huge crows, on the tops of the tallest trees they can find. It is possible to stalk them at this time with a rook rifle. But the sportsman who has successfully stalked and shot once will not easily repeat the feat on the same day.

In mid-winter, during severe weather, and especially after an inordinately long snowstorm, the blackcock have a habit which I shall best describe by giving a short narrative of the first occasion on which I became acquainted with it. This was during a week's snow-shoeing in the wilds of northern Russia. I had my gun, of course, and was sliding gaily along all alone over a vast expanse of snow-covered moor. I carried my gun because it was impossible to guess what game I might or might not see; but at the particular moment of which I am writing I was not dreaming of game, for I could see and be seen for a mile around, and there was nothing visible but the dazzling soft snow in which I walked, or rather slid along, on my narrow wooden snow-shoes. Suddenly, to my intense surprise and almost consternation, a large blackcock

rose from my very feet. Now I could have taken an affidavit that no blackcock had been sitting anywhere near me; I must have seen it if it had, for its black body would be very visible against the white of the snow. So startled and surprised was I that, though I instinctively cocked my gun, I did not pull the trigger, and the bird was out of range before I could collect myself. Where in the world had it come from? I could see no mark in the snow excepting a small hole, which might, certainly, have been the spot in which the bird had lain; but then I should have seen it.

As I stood wondering and turning the matter over and over in my puzzled brain, to my intense surprise a second blackcock suddenly rose from nowhere, at my very feet, and flew off in the same direction as the first. This time, however, I overcame the feeling of almost supernatural awe which the uncanny proceeding had occasioned, and slew the blackcock before it reached a safe distance. Having thus proved to my own satisfaction that the blackcock were no phantoms or wood-spirits, but real flesh and blood, I quickly banished the very idea of the supernatural, and set myself to find out the meaning of the riddle. But before I could devote much time or thought to its elucidation, another and another black-

cock rose within a few yards of me. Now I had only brought half-a-dozen cartridges with me, not wishing to carry weight on my snow-shoeing expedition. Those six cartridges were fired off within the next two minutes. It was something like pigeon-shooting, barring the traps. The blackcock rose from any quarter, right or left, in front of me or behind, without the slightest warning; indeed, one nearly knocked me off my legs by rising out of the snow at my very feet, covering my snow-shoe with a shower of white spray as it rose from, apparently, the bowels of the earth. The fun was too fast to permit of any scientific investigations until it was over; but when my last cartridge was burned, and four fine birds lay bleeding on the snow, I had leisure to look more closely into the mystery. Will it be believed that, as I stood in one spot gazing about me for the explanation I sought, at least thirty more blackcock rose within easy shot of me, one by one, each rising like a ghost from nowhere, and whizzing away before my very eyes? In five minutes they had all gone, and I was at liberty to examine the thirty-five holes in the snow which was all that was left to show where the colony had been established a few moments before. I investigated these holes and found that each was

the opening to a long narrow passage, from a yard to a couple of yards in length, slanting downwards and along. I afterwards learned, on inquiry, that the blackcock will, in rough weather, and when the snow is deep and soft, desert their trees and bushes, and, flying in a body across an open plain, suddenly, and with one consent, swoop downwards, and with folded wings, but at full speed, take a "header" into the snow, each bird thus penetrating to a distance of a yard or two, and forming with the impetus of his "header" a comfortable warm lodging for the night. Since that day I have seen the operation performed. As may be imagined, if a sportsman, well provided with ammunition, has the luck to stumble as I did into the midst of a blackcock hotel, he may make a considerable bag in a very few minutes without stirring from his place. But I warn him that the first blackcock's appearance out of nowhere will startle him out of his wits. With this last episode I will close this sketch of my old friend the blackcock and his ways. I cannot disguise from myself the fact that he is an immoral and ignoble old rip, as well as a humbug of the most pronounced type; but with all his faults I love him dearly, and am ready and delighted for his sake to tramp at any time over wood and

moor, to slide all day long over the snowy plains, or to sit and shiver in a *shalashka* for hours at a time, if only to see his delightful old hectoring, swaggering, humbugging ways, and have another good laugh at him and his brothers as they endeavour to convey to the ladies of their family, without unnecessary violence, the notion that they are braves of the first water, and will prove faithful and tender husbands and fathers, if chosen as such. As for the sequel—alas for the poor greyhens who are, year after year, taken in by them! Perhaps they deserve their fate for their credulity. But if these ladies could sometimes watch their future husbands from the coign of vantage of a *shalashka*, as I did, they might learn a thing or two about their valour which they possibly do not now suspect.

VI

KING CAPERCAILZIE

I BEGIN this chapter with a dogmatic assertion: the capercailzie is the grandest, wildest, and most majestic game-bird in the world. There may be (there always is) something larger in America; but for majesty and freedom and grandeur the capercailzie "whips creation," and as for size—he is big enough for us Europeans. The European keeper who has to carry home two or three of the family, after a long tramp through moor and forest, probably thinks him a good deal too large! But before I proceed with my description of the glorious creature in whose praise I have now taken up my pen, let me first beg of all those of my readers who never enjoyed the privilege of beholding a capercailzie alive, to banish from their recollection the forlorn spectacle of dead-brown and ragged wretchedness afforded to them by the rows of long dead and frozen specimens hanging in degradation from nails outside the poulterer's window, and labelled forsooth "caper-

cailzies." These no more represent the real creature as God made him, and as he appears in life and independence, the undisputed pinioned monarch of the pathless forest, than would "Imperial Cæsar dead and turned to clay" adequately recall the power and the majesty of the living man. My admiration for the bird, which I am sure any one who has seen as much of him as I have must cordially share, does not blind me, I trust, to his faults; for the old gentleman, Mr. Paterfamilias, is by no means a faultless creature (no more, after all, was Imperial Cæsar): he, like his small cousin the blackcock, is a poor sort of a consort to his really exemplary spouse; and he is moreover a very bad father, neglecting his little "boys and girls," and the old lady, their most faithful and devoted nurse-mother, in the most disgraceful manner, and living at his club, so to speak, on the moors all through the tiresome process of hatching and covey-rearing, just as though he were the veriest old bachelor with no domestic responsibilities whatever weighing upon his shoulders. But who can blame him? A king cannot be expected to spend his time acting nursery-maid, or helping his wife to check the tradesmen's bills; he feels that this is occupation unworthy of a monarch; and

the capercailzie *is* a king—of that there is no possible doubt whatever.

I made my first acquaintance with the capercailzie in the summer-time, that is, towards the end of August—a season of the year when it is extremely difficult to meet with a member of the family; for the bachelor father is far too wary to allow himself to be seen by mortal eye, while the careful mother is safely hidden with her little ones (?) around her, somewhere in the remotest recesses of the forest. The above note of interrogation is designed to convey to the reader that the young capercailzies are never so very small, and that by the end of August they cannot be described as "little ones," except relatively—for instance, as compared with a haystack. I remember I was very young at the time, and that I was struggling through an intensely thick part of the wood followed by an offended and indignant keeper, who had some reason for the state of his feelings; for I had fired many cartridges, with results which he had more than once summarised in the remark that "God was very merciful to the birds this morning." Suddenly there arose a din as though all the trees of the forest were falling at once—it came from every side, apparently, and I cocked my gun in an automatic sort of way,

though I had not the slightest idea what the terrific noise might portend; but old Spiridon, the Russian keeper, soon enlightened me: he was absolutely frenzied with excitement: "*Strelyai!*" he yelled, "*gluharee!*" (Shoot! they are capercailzies!) Well, I saw nothing, but for Spiridon's sake I shot; for I felt that he would certainly assault me, and perhaps have an apoplectic fit into the bargain, if I did not. So I fired off both barrels in the direction of the nearest crackling of branches. Verily one bird of that family of eight (the keeper said there were eight, though how he discovered the fact quite beats my comprehension!) had incurred the odium of fortune this day. There was plenty of room for my shot all round that bird. I didn't know whereabouts the poor creature was, but somehow my pellets sought it out and winged it, and Spiridon was upon it in the twinkling of an eye, and, before saint Jack Robinson could be invoked, the huge capercailzie princeling was no more. Spiridon and I shook hands over that bird: he said it was a splendid shot, and I was mean enough to pretend I thought so too. A young cock, nearly full-grown, and with his adult feathers already making a fine show—oh! he was a splendid creature, and though my game-bag was not heavily burdened up to his arrival, I remember

Spiridon had the greatest difficulty in squeezing his bulky form into the accommodation at his disposal. The heaviest moors were to me as nothing for the rest of that happy day: I walked on winged feet: I banged away at all and everything that rose within shot: I fired into the "brown," with absolute impunity to the covey, whenever an opportunity came: I even took a sitting shot at a promising family of ducks, which I managed to stalk as they floated unsuspectingly upon the sunny surface of a woodland lake, without the shedding of blood; but nothing mattered now—I was perfectly happy; an odd willow-grouse or two, or a vulgar mallard (animals, both, of no merit whatever), could not make any appreciable difference to my feelings either one way or another. I had killed a capercailzie: it was enough: man could desire no further blessedness! Since that day I have occasionally met with a stray capercailzie in summer-time, and once again I came across a whole covey—and saw them, too. My dog, I remember, an English setter, found them; but he was not equal to the shock of their uprisal, and when they rose from the earth, like half-a-dozen animated haystacks, the frightened animal, instead of standing his ground, put his tail between his legs and

incontinently ran away and hid himself from the unfamiliar horror.

But these were all chance meetings. My real introduction to the royal family of the forest was in spring, at the season of the year when the capercailzie, like the blackcock, holds his annual tournament for the delectation of the ladies of his court, as well as for the convenient display of his personal prowess and attractions. He is in all his glory at this season: his plumage is at its grandest, and he is full of vigour and of the pride of life. Winter is practically over, and food is becoming more plentiful day by day; his fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love, and he feels inclined for all the hectoring and fighting which accompanies, among his people, the ceremony of pairing. So old king capercailzie hies him on the first fine, still March night—no matter if it be a little cold, say a trifle of a few degrees below zero; it takes more than that to cool the grand old bird's ardour!—he hies him to the time-honoured rendezvous in the forest; a place where there are plenty of tall pines, with here and there a birch, and undergrowth enough to conceal the ladies who attend as spectators, but not too much to interfere with his movements when he descends from his high throne upon the topmost

pine-bough in order to do battle with other younger monarchs upon the ground below. This rendezvous must be well in the heart of the forest, or it will not do. He must be perfectly secure from interruption, because—as shall presently be shown—he is very defenceless during one portion of the proceedings. Arrived at the tourney-ground this G.O.M. among the capercailzies, who is known to wood-craftsmen as the "king of the *tok*," or tournament, and who is either the eldest or the doughtiest warrior of his district, carefully selects a convenient tree for his purpose—flying from one to another until he has found one which exactly answers his requirements; this will probably be a pine, moderately tall and well covered with boughs, amongst which he may conceal his big body. Seated upon this lofty perch the old warrior will first shake out and arrange his feathers after, perhaps, a long flight from far away on the opposite side of the dense and interminable forest. Then, after a light supper culled from the budding greenery which he finds in abundance all around him, he proceeds to declare the tournament open for the season. This he does by issuing challenges to the world in general during the space of an hour or two, say from 9 to 10.30 P.M., after which he falls

asleep on his perch until 2 or 2.30 A.M., when he awakes to resume his challenging labours. During the morning *tok*, which is far the more important of the two, the evening *tok* being merely a sort of rehearsal of the heavier work to be done in the small hours, other warriors will probably be attracted by the challenges of the old king, and will arrive upon the scene and unite their voices to his; and so the annual *tok* becomes gradually a *fait accompli*, increasing daily in the number of its participants until it has arrived, early in April, at the maximum of its dimensions. It is during the progress of the *tok* that the capercailzie may most easily be found, for he then freely advertises his whereabouts to all who are anxious to know it; and it is, moreover, at this time that he is stalked and shot—potted, alas! as he sits, magnificent in his fearless majesty and beauty, issuing challenges to his peers and proclaiming his prowess to the ladies of his court as they crouch amid the cover below, their beady eyes eagerly watching the doings of their lords, admiring, and no doubt forming their own conclusions in silence, save for an occasional cluck or two of quiet satisfaction or affection.

I hold no brief in defence of the ethics of spring shooting as practised in Russia. There is, however,

this to be said for it, that, as with black-game, so with capercailzies, there is so great a preponderance of the male birds over the females of the species that, in order to preserve the proper balance between the sexes, and to prevent the destruction of whole sittings of eggs—owing to quarrels of cock birds over a favourite hen as she serenely sits upon her nest regardless of the battles raging about and around her—it is absolutely necessary to keep down the numbers of the belligerent sex. I know of no other argument in favour of shooting capercailzies in the manner indicated; but in Russia it is recognised, it is lawful, and every sportsman, English or foreign, does it and therefore I too did it, sharing, like the poet's schoolboy, "the plunder, but pitying the"—bird. How I "did it," and how the knights of the *tok* conducted their little affairs of love and honour, I now propose to show by describing a night spent in the depth of the forest, watching and stalking them as they revealed before my eyes this most interesting and fascinating chapter of natural history. So fascinating, indeed, was it, that, in spite of the feeling of regret which undoubtedly damps the perfect pleasure of the sportsman who indulges, out of pure love of Nature, in what he cannot but regard as a more or less

unsportsmanlike proceeding, were I to be asked to state what particular experience of the out-door portion of my existence has, on the whole, supplied me with the greatest amount of pure delight at the time, and the largest fund of happy recollection to go back upon for the rest of my days, I think I should name my first night after capercailzies. One reason for my choice of this among many red-letter experiences in the open air is, perhaps, because it *was* a night experience. There is something about night and the very early morning hours, in the woods, that is unspeakably delightful. One feels that it is good for one to be there, amid the solemn silence of the tall pines, listening—with one's soul all alive and intense—to the soft breathing of the air as it stirs and sways the topmost branches. One feels then, in the hush of the dead of night, that one really and truly possesses a soul, and that it is at its best amid such surroundings as these, communing in the silence with something higher than itself. Such silence as this is like the grandest and most solemn music. I have often felt, as I lay hushed and awed beneath the dark canopies arching into space above my head, that the intense stillness must be pervaded by some subtle, unseen, spiritual essence; that how ill so ever

things may be in towns and places which sin and sorrow can reach, yet all is well here; and that the thrilling silence must—either this moment or the next, or eventually—burst suddenly into some stupendous chant of praise and peace. Night is beautiful always, but especially so in springtime, in the woods; and I should recommend those who cannot see for themselves whether this is true in a Russian forest, with capercailzies thrown in, to try it in an English spinney; only let them select a wood which is patronised neither by poacher nor keeper.

I have pictured elsewhere the delights of riding or driving over Russian country roads in springtime, when the sledge tracks have not as yet entirely given place to mud, and locomotion of any sort over them is a pain and likewise a grief; suffice to say, that I had, somehow or other, reached Ostermanch—that home of the gods (those of the chase), and that my limbs, if stiff, were unbroken; that my friend A—— was at my side; that the night was an ideal one; that we had already tossed for keepers, and that I, favoured by fortune, had drawn Matvei, whose tok was nearer than that of Lákoo, and a far better one besides. A—— and I parted at the lodge gates, and each took his own way. Ostermanch being less advanced towards spring

than the country nearer to St. Petersburg, we were enabled to perform the journey from house to distant forest in sledges, instead of "tarantasses"—a circumstance for which I thanked the benign god of travels with all my heart and bones!

The drive through those wild places in the dead of night was superb! There was very little of balmy spring in the temperature: in a word, it was freezing about as hard as it knew how; but a heart full of joyous anticipation, assisted by a pair of long felt boots and a huge bear-skin "shuba," can afford to laugh at the thermometer and all its works. Matvei directed his pair of game little ponies through the forest, where to the uninitiated one tree is in no respect different from another, and where there was no sort of apology for a road, just as though there lay before him a track as wide and as well-defined as Rotten Row, and we were at our destination in the very midst of the dense part of the capercailzie grounds before I had realised that half the intervening five miles had been covered. All the arrangements for a large bonfire had been carried out beforehand, and all we had to do was to apply the match. The scene, when the flames shot up and revealed it to my eyes, was something to dream of for ever afterwards,

and to remember, at moments when the cares of this life were springing up and choking you; when, if you felt inclined to revile a nagging destiny, you might recall as at least one point in her favour, that you had been permitted to see the forest at Ostermanch lit up in the midst of its solemn nocturnal silence and majesty! The tall pines were still half covered with masses of snow, but they nodded their heads in the bright light of the fire, as though thanking us for the delightful warmth which we had imparted to the air around us; and as the heat became greater, they dropped one after another the snow burdens which had bowed their proud necks during the long winter, starting back joyously as they did so, and swaying backwards and forwards until they rested at last in the dignity of the perpendicular. It was twelve o'clock now, midnight, and Matvei, after gulping down his large wooden bowl of scalding tea, was walking about collecting stocks of dry pine-twigs with which to replenish the fire, preparatory to stretching himself for a two-hour sleep. His figure, as it went in and out of the radius of unsteady light shed by our bonfire, took all sorts of weird shapes—his shadow, as he stood, now and again, to chop with his hatchet some promising log, giving the appearance of a terrible ogre of the forest in the act of com-

mitting a deed of darkness such as ogres delight in. But very soon his chopping ceased, and Matvei, wrapped in his stained and aged sheepskin, lay sleeping as sleep the just ones, yea, and the unjust also, if weary, leaving the forest and its spirits and gnomes and darkness and sombre majesty to me alone of mortal men.

The rest was silence.

It was indeed a solemn thought, as I lay on my back and watched the little patch of black sky above the tops of the trees, (it had four small stars in it, I remember), that here was I all alone, of my kind, at the mercy of every sort of spirit or wild beast that chose to come prowling around! I did not mind the beasts, for I could make things very unpleasant for bear, lynx, or wolf, if these should show themselves; but what about the Erlkönig, for instance, if he were to appear with his engaging daughter, and invite me, as he invited "another little boy," to accompany him to his home and play games with his relations? It was all very well to treat him and his as the creatures of poetical imagination, when safe at home or in the concert-room; but it was quite a different thing here, within the limits of his own kingdom! Is that dark thing yonder his arm—half hidden by the mantle?

See, it seems to beckon! no, it is not the Erlkönig, nor the deceitful girl his daughter; it is nothing but a pine-branch disposing of its load of snow, which falls with a thud to the ground, causing me a momentary start, for my nerves are all at high tension as yet. Soon, however, soul and nerves and all yield themselves to the influence of the perfect rest and peace prevailing. Oh! what a silence it was. I scarcely dared breathe for fear of spoiling it. It was like a spell around one, soothing to the very deepest recesses of one's being. What a philosophy, what a religion, what a revelation was in that intense stillness: what books and libraries of eloquent sermons . . . what perfection of repose. . . . An hour and a half of all this: sleep, quotha? I scorn the insinuation!—I repeat, an hour and a half of this, and then suddenly, abruptly, shockingly, the willow-grouse, who is the alarum-clock of the woods, gave his morning call; like a sudden boisterous laugh it rang out, and murdered the silence. It brought me, with startling suddenness, from heaven to earth, and it brought old Matvei from earth, on which he lay a-snoring, to his feet—with a bound. It was time for us to be up and about! Matvei must be my guide at first, for this was a new experience to me; therefore when the keeper placed his finger on

his lips and signed to me to follow him, I did so with all docility.

Like a pair of thieves of the night, we two then commenced to prowl silently about, now in one direction, now in another, listening. Personally I had not the remotest idea as to what manner of sound I ought to hear, but I listened intently all the same. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, to be heard except the occasional thud of a falling mass of snow. It was still dark, as dark as pitch; and now that we had left the fire behind us, we could feel how cold a Russian spring night can be. So we wandered—now moving slowly forward, now stopping still, but always listening. All of a sudden something happened which sent my pulses flying and my heart beating madly: we had been standing for a moment beneath a tree, listening, when the whole of the top of the tree seemed, without the slightest warning, to be tearing itself away—for this is what the noise suggested to my startled mind, at the first instant. The din was immediately followed by a similar crashing among the topmost twigs of the neighbouring trees, and this again by what I now recognised as the beating of a pair of giant wings. I grasped Matvei's arm convulsively!—what was it?

Matvei's finger was at his lips, and he was sagely nodding his head.

"That was a capercailzie," he whispered. "We must not move again until we hear the *tokooing* begin: sit down!"

So that was a capercailzie: gracious Heaven, what if all these sombre trees are peopled with sleeping giants like this monster we have just aroused? It was a maddening thought! How could I possibly sit quietly here, doing nothing, with perhaps half-a-dozen of the grandest birds in the world actually asleep on trees within a short distance of the one under which we sat? Well, there was nothing to be done; all I could do was to sit still and hope that the spirit might soon move them to begin "tokooing," whatever that might mean. Away from the fire the darkness was intense: I could see nothing, hear nothing; but I watched the clumps of snow in the top branches of the pines—I could make out the presence of the dark masses against the sky-line—and wondered whether any of these were capercailzies, and if so, which? Suddenly, bringing my eyes down after a prolonged stare upwards, I caught sight of Matvei behaving in a very extraordinary manner: what in the name of all that is insane was the man doing? He was proceed-

ing for all the world as though he were practising for a competition in hop-step-and-jump: was the man mad? I expected to see him look round at me the next moment with a yell of triumph or defiance, and perhaps make his next leap straight at my throat—poor fellow! the cold must have unhinged his reason. I grasped my gun: mad or sane I could checkmate him in case of an attack. But to my surprise, and certainly to my relief as well, when he had finished his insane hops and jumps he looked round at me, and lo! his sage Finnish countenance was as grave and wise-looking as ever. At all events, he was a harmless lunatic then; but what in the world did it mean, and why did mine own familiar friend A—— play this grim pleasantry upon me? To be all alone, in the very middle of a pathless Russian forest, with a bounding and hopping maniac for guide, even though he were a harmless bounder, was not an enviable situation. Perhaps dear old A—— didn't know he was—great Cæsar! why, there the fellow goes again! See, he looks round and beckons! it is just like a ghost story. Mr. W. T. Stead, Mr. Myers, what does it all mean? who is he? ought I to follow him? what is he? I am not a Hamlet, and no man ever to my knowledge ill-treated my father; what, then, can he have to

show me? . . I sat stolidly on, not knowing how to act under the embarrassing circumstances. Then Matvei looked round again, and his countenance lowered as he beckoned repeatedly . . . he looked sane enough—what if this was part of the game? Then suddenly it struck me to listen very intently. A—— had told me that I must look out for a sound like that of two sticks being gently struck together; this was the first challenge of the capercailzie. A—— said that as soon as I heard it I must follow Matvei and allow him to stalk the first bird with me.

I listened . . . sure enough, there it was, a tiny sound—surely the huge capercailzie could not be the author of such a ridiculous little noise as that: tok (it went) tok-toka-toka, and each time, the moment after it began, Matvei started his hops and jumps. In an instant the whole thing was as clear as day to me! What precious moments I had wasted. . . . Quick as the thought I was up and after Matvei, jumping when he jumped, but in my excitement covering distances which would have caused Mr. Fry and his 23 ft. 5 in. to retire into obscurity, and which soon brought me up to old Matvei's heels. In a couple of minutes I had mastered the keeper's tactics. I found that he did not jump, or stir at all, during

the progress of the challenge; but that there followed after this note an even more ridiculously tiny sound, rather like the futile attempts of a starling to rival its vocal neighbours. While this little piping sound continues, a space of about four seconds, the bird is bereft of all sense of hearing and seeing, and the sportsman may take three or four steps towards him. Without knowing the reason for this phenomenon, I quickly gathered that the fact was as I have stated, and, making a mental resolution that when it became light I should investigate matters, I determined to make the most of the present opportunity, lest another should not occur. So on I pounded after Matvei. I soon discovered that the bird did not always follow up his wide-awake challenge with the second sound or song; but when he did intend to proceed, the tok-toka notes followed each other with increasing rapidity until they merged into the short-song; so that we were able to know exactly when to prepare ourselves for the few frantic jumps permitted us. The bird, as I judged, was distant at first about one hundred yards from our starting-point, a distance which we reduced by one half after five minutes of listening and jumping. Then I could stand old Matvei's slow methods and stately but inadequate

bounds no longer: I quite understood the thing now, and I should get over the ground twice as fast without him. So I gave the old gentleman my flask to amuse him, and requested to be allowed to manage my own stalking. The bird was in full swing now, "tokooing" magnificently, each series of challenges being followed by the longed-for song during which I might jump. My bounds, so great was my excitement, were simply frenzied, and I doubt whether I could have covered half the distance in cold blood. I heard now, to my delight, several other capercailzies issuing their challenges around and beyond me, but my bird was the nearest—indeed he was now certainly within twenty yards of me, if only I could see him. I thought I knew, at least, which tree he was perched upon, and jumped gradually up to and stood under it. Yes, undoubtedly this was his tree—but, strain my eyes as I would, I could not determine which of the several dark masses among the boughs above my head was my quarry and which was snow. I was trembling so violently with excitement that I was afraid the bird might hear the cartridges rattle in my pocket: as for my teeth, they were playing away like a lot of castanets: this would never do; I must make up my mind what to fire at,

and—well, take my chance. This was all very fine in theory; but when, during the next opportunity, I raised my gun and endeavoured to point it in the direction of what I had decided, after much painful reflection, must be the capercailzie, I discovered that it was perfectly impossible to sight the object—it was still too dark. I therefore resolved, at the very next song, to fix my eyes upon the thing—snow or bird—and raise my gun quickly at it as I should at any flying object, and pull the trigger in the hope that by force of habit I should "cover" it, even in the darkness.

I did so. . . . To my utter astonishment nothing happened—absolutely nothing. A little snow came sprinkling down from the tree, and the sound of my shot, coming like an outrage upon the repose of the forest, went reverberating through the sombre distance; a capercailzie somewhere not very far away left its perch and flew crashing through the darkness; but several of those which had been tokooing around me were still hard at it, and—most marvellous of all, *my* capercailzie continued to send out his challenges and to sing his little songs as glibly and unhesitatingly as though nothing had happened. Clearly, either the capercailzie is constitutionally a deaf bird, or else

there is something very remarkable about his condition during the latter portion of his tokoo! One thing was quite certain, I had selected the wrong object to fire at: I must try again. This time I stared and stared again until I thought I saw one dark mass slightly moving against the dark sky-line above it. The sound, too, seemed to come from that exact spot, though I was well aware that in the matter of "locating" a sound, nothing in the world could be more deceptive. However, something must be done to put an end to the unbearable tension of the situation. . . . I waited for the song, and fired in the same way as before. . . . Instantly there was a great crashing of twigs, and a flapping of two monster wings, and a thud on the ground at my feet. At the same instant, with a rapidity for which I had certainly never given his Finnish solemnity credit, Matvei had covered the intervening distance and thrown himself upon the fallen bird, clasping the two great wings in his arms, lest they should frighten other capercailzies by their beating. The next moment the glorious creature had been done to death—slain, meanly enough, in the midst of his pride and boasting. But the body of the dead monarch was mine—mine, in all the gorgeous majesty of its green-blue

neck, and scarlet eyebrows, and grand hooked beak, and whites and browns and greys innumerable. I believe I hugged the bird; I am certain that I gave Matvei so resounding a slap on the back that his solemn old Finnish face relaxed, for once, into a grin. Good old Matvei, he was a true sportsman, as foreigners go, and a keen keeper. He is dead now, several years since, and Ostermanch is no longer British territory; and, taking all things into consideration, I doubt if I shall ever look upon its like and his like again. Keen Matvei, who did not share my semi-regretful views as to the slaughter of unsuspecting birds in spring, left me no time for the indulgence of sentiment. He picked up the imperial corpse, and beckoned me onwards; for there was quite a number of birds tokooing all around us, and in stalking capercailzies the motto is, *Carpe diem.*

So away I went again, going through the proceedings already described, *da capo*, while the light grew ever stronger, and Matvei's load of murdered majesty grew ever heavier. There was not much variety in the procedure, excepting in the fact that as the light became better and the stalker more visible, the art of stalking waxed more and more difficult. The birds are very wary, and if they have the slightest suspicion of foul

play, will not proceed to that stage of the tokoo during which they are insensible and defenceless. There was one bird, I remember, tokooing as if he had vowed to sing a certain number of songs before sunrise and was rather behind time. I had stalked him in a strong half light until I was within seventy yards of his tree; I could see him plainly, and he could see me equally well; only that, during his conscious periods I was motionless, impersonating the stump of a dead pine —at least, that is what I conclude he must have supposed me to be. But the ground was bad—patches of deep snow alternating with pools of water covered with ice of moderate thickness;—not the winter's ice, for that had disappeared; but the ice of this one cold night's formation. I had taken four frantic bounds during a song, and ended by landing with a terrific leap upon the icy covering to a pool. Unfortunately the ice did not bear the strain and broke with a crash, letting me through, up to the waist. Just that very instant the bird's song came to an end, and he was restored to consciousness in time to hear the noise. I saw him turn his head in my direction and listen. . . . I dared not breathe, and oh! how cold that water was. . . . One of my arms was held aloft in the instinctive desire to keep the

gun dry: the other had grasped some stalks of yellow grass on the bank. . . . I remained motionless, while the old knight looked and looked at me, as who should say, "Well, I've seen many a queer-shaped pine-trunk in this forest, but riddle me if I ever saw one quite that figure before!"

However, after staring for a long five minutes, during which he never uttered a sound and I was all but reduced to an ice-block, he at last concluded that it must be all right, recommenced his ditties, and allowed me to creep, all stiff and but half alive, out of my all-too-early morning tub. But I soon found that I was still suspected. He would continue his tok-toka notes for an age without proceeding further, watching me the while; then he would sing once, and allow me to approach a few yards nearer; then he would deliberately cheat me, quickening his challenges as though about to relapse into insensibility, but stop short at the last moment, turning to see what happened to the suspected tree-trunk. Twice I managed to stop myself, but the third time he caught me, stopping short so abruptly that before I could restrain myself I had made a movement towards him. In an instant he was gone, free and far; and in all probability the tok saw no more of him for many a long

day—until the natural craving to be up and among his fellows overcame the horrid surprise occasioned by the spectacle of a walking tree-trunk in the midst of the tourney-ground. Soon it became quite light—it was within but a short while of sunrise. I had shot six glorious birds, and had arrived at the stage when, tired of shedding blood, I felt more glad than sorry if a capercailzie proved too cunning for me, and carried his beautiful life away with him to enjoy in freedom and independence until some other sportsman should come to snatch from him what the gods had given. So I decided to stalk one more bird, for the sake of observing closely his behaviour during that mysterious moment of unconsciousness and song. There was a huge specimen tokooing grandly at a spot which I could reach well protected by cover; for at this late period of the tok it had become exceedingly difficult to approach in the open. By dint of careful stalking, and keeping well behind every intervening object which offered cover, I succeeded in advancing to within ten yards of the tree upon which the capercailzie was still busy tokooing—the last of the challengers, for all the rest had now ceased. I observed that during his challenges he sat straight up, moving his massive head round with each call, as though looking about to

see where was the champion that dared respond to his defiance? As the toka note increased in speed the bird became perceptibly more and more excited: his tail rose and spread, fan-like, behind and over him, his wings gradually drooped, his body quivered, and when he relapsed into the little song which marks the climax of his passion, his head and neck were stretched downwards to their full extent, and swayed from side to side in a helpless, intoxicated sort of way, very curious to witness. I have already explained that at this stage the bird is absolutely insensible to sound, and is as blind as though it possessed no eyes, instead of being the owner of two of the sharpest orbs in the forest. Writing as an unlearned amateur, I am inclined to think that at the supreme moment of passion (whether the passion be that of bellicosity or of an amorous character, I do not hazard an opinion), a rush of blood to the head produces the result which is so favourable to the wily advance of the sportsman, and renders the bird so pathetically defenceless that, in spite of its usual wariness, it falls an easy prey to its enemies. As I watched, with mingled admiration and delight, the sun rose and shed his gold upon the duller hues of the bird: it only needed this! all the subdued colours became in an instant gorgeous and

lovely to look upon: he was superb; from his green neck to the tip of his speckled black and grey tail; he shone like a blaze of parti-coloured light. He ceased tokooing as soon as the sun appeared, and commenced to preen his glossy feathers, nibbling lazily, occasionally, at a young pine-shoot, and shaking himself out. Ah! he was a beauty indeed, and it is a privilege, for which I hope I am grateful, to have thus enjoyed a quarter of an hour's undisturbed bliss in the luxury of watching one of God's most beautiful children of the air, under circumstances perfectly favourable. But it could not last for ever. The splendid creature departed suddenly, at last, as though it recollected an engagement, and hurtled away through the pines, flashing its wings, here and there, in the sun, till it passed from my sight. A willow-grouse was still laughing in the distance, and I could make out the last crooning of the blackcock-tok, still farther off; little birds were abroad, making merry in the awakened sunlight, delighted that the terrible cold night was over; and I, too, became aware that I was cold and wet, and required something more substantial than the joy of watching Nature in order to keep body and soul together. So I bade farewell to forest and pine-trees, and capercailzies and erlkönig,

and to all my companions of the silent night, and regretfully turned my back upon an experience which I can never hope to match for pure delight.

The capercailzies, I have been told, occasionally descend to the earth in order to do battle with one another; but I have not seen this, though I do not doubt the fact. A struggle between two capercailzie knights would be a glorious sight to see, and I fancy they would display more real courage than their hectoring but poor-spirited relatives, the blackcock. With these latter it is all cry and no wool.

The capercailzie is not often to be met with excepting under conditions as narrated above; but I have occasionally seen him at a battue, swinging his big body over the tops of the trees at a pace which makes him a difficult shot for the ordinary marksman, in spite of his size. It is only at his annual tok that he can be seen and watched closely, or where a number of his family assemble together like other game-birds of lesser dignity. At other times King Capercailzie prefers to keep to himself, far away in the seclusion of his kingdom, the pine-woods. There he dwells alone, solitary and majestic: the grandest and the proudest and the most exclusive and unapproachable of all game-birds.

VII

RUSSIAN WOODCOCK AND FINN PONIES

Many game birds, some of which I have already enumerated, have peculiar rites and ceremonies in which they engage during the pairing season. Among others the woodcock has his own particular little ways, interesting enough to the naturalist and affording to the not-too-conscientious sportsman an opportunity of bagging a brace or two, if he cares to do such a thing in the month of April, or even the early part of May. I confess that of all the unusual sporting methods with which I became familiar in Russia, this spring woodcock-shooting was the one which pleased me least. My reasons for arriving at this conclusion are, I think, good on the whole. For instance, the woodcock is a respectable and domesticated member of bird-society; he is not the dissolute old rip that Mr. Blackcock père must permit me to call him; neither is he the haughty, aristocratic, magnificent Don Juan that old King Capercailzie must plead

guilty to being. He is a far better husband and father, and for this reason he should be treated with greater generosity by the sporting community during the times and ceremonies of his love-making. There is, however, one thing to be said for the "sport" under consideration: the woodcock is not, at least, shot sitting—indeed, he is given a fair chance of escape; for it is not quite so easy as the reader might at first suppose to bring down with certainty a woodcock flitting quickly through the dusk. On the other hand, I fear that the hen bird often falls a victim instead of the cock, for under the circumstances just mentioned, it is of course impossible to distinguish one from the other. Apart, however, from the drawback which conscientious considerations must interpose to the perfect enjoyment of the woodcock "tiaga," as it is called, the experience was new and delightful, and I propose to give a short description of it, only stipulating that the conscientious reader will kindly keep his feelings well in hand while he reads of woodcock slaughtered in the pairing season: I will not shock those feelings more than is absolutely necessary in the cause of research. Well, then: A—— said that I really must see a "tiaga," which he translated "draw" or "current," *i.e.*, flight of woodcock; and as this function

takes place in the evening, it was easy and convenient to attend the same, while at Ostermanch, without interfering with the night business of capercailzie stalking; in fact, the tiaga could be negotiated on the way to the capercailzie lists.

It was a warm evening, and fairly light, as we jogged along towards the cutting in the centre of a rather dense belt of forest, which was known to the initiated as the spring rendezvous of the amorous woodcock; and as we rode through the romantic half light of the woods A—— gave me my instructions as to the *modus operandi.* It was just like a drive without beaters, he said. I should be placed in one spot and he in another, and presently the woodcock would come flying, one after another, at intervals of a minute or two, right over our heads or near us.

"But why?" I asked, "what for? where do they go to, and what do they do it for?"

But this was a point in woodcock economy which even A——, so learned in all matters connected with the wild life of the woodlands, could not satisfactorily explain. He supposed it was a sort of "march past," or review of the male birds for the benefit of the females. This is a graceful theory: but a weak point in it is, that in all probability the cocks do not do all

the promenading: the hens take their turn of flying as well. So, at least, one may reasonably suppose; for it is certain that if the sportsman throws up his cap within sight of a flying woodcock, the bird will often turn aside and settle in the spot where he observed the cap fall to the earth, doubtless under the impression that the object thus alighting is a lady of the woodcock persuasion, perhaps the idol of his affections, in whose tracks he is following, and who has settled short of the usual spot chosen for the resting and love-making place. It would seem then, that the hen bird leads the way, and is followed at the usual interval, accepted as correct by the rules of woodcock etiquette, by the cock who has gained or is occupied in gaining her affections, who takes the exact line of flight chosen by his mistress and settles when and where she does. I have no scientific knowledge as to this point, however, and can only give my own ideas on the subject, which must be accepted for what they are worth—which is not much, I fear.

A—— explained further that I should not see the birds very plainly, since they commenced to fly only when dusk fell; but that if I listened very attentively, I should hear a faint warning of the approach of each bird while it was some distance away: a low whistle

followed by a soft croaklike sound, almost inaudible, but which could just be distinguished in the intense silence of the oncoming night! A minute or two after hearing the warning sound indicated, I should see the bird cross the cutting close over my head.

So A—— left me standing in my appointed place, and himself journeyed on to a point distant about half a mile from my own position. It was seven o'clock, and the evening was marvellously still and fine. The cold spring nights were well over now, and there was no longer any frost in the air; the snow had melted and disappeared from the face of the earth; even those hidden drifts in the heart of the forest, which had so long escaped the eye of the spring god, had at last been detected and chased from their lair. There was scarcely enough wind to sway the slender tops of the pines. All nature seemed to be waiting in hushed expectancy, and in the but half-realised joy of an emancipation from the thraldom of winter, which it could not as yet believe to be really and truly complete. Not a bird was singing, not a frog croaked; both would burst out into their own particular pæans of joy before night fell—say at about nine o'clock, and sing for another hour or so, just when the blackcock and capercailzies sallied out for their short evening

rehearsal of the next morning's serious functions. A little field-mouse, followed immediately by a friend, came out and ran over and over my shooting boots as I sat and mused. They pursued one another for several minutes over these new hunting-grounds, wondering, doubtless, what sort of a novelty in tree trunks this strongly scented thing might be, and whether it offered anything particularly fascinating in the way of a site for a new nest. Apparently it failed to answer to their ideals in this respect, for they suddenly left me and scudded away, and I saw them no more. Suddenly, to me listening, there came a sound from far away. It was so very quiet and gentle a sound that it seemed at first more like the stuff dreams are made of than the actual vocal intimation of a woodcock's approach. Yet, as I listened intently, I could distinctly detect both the whistle and the croak, though both were mere whispers which, had there been wind enough to set the pines a-rustling, I could not possibly have heard at all. In another moment I was aware of a presence. It was so dark now, however, that I do not think I should have known what bird had suddenly emerged from the gloom and entered into the area of my vision: it looked so large in the dusk, and so ghostlike as it came sailing along

through the air: not hurrying itself, but just swinging easily along at a moderate pace straight for a point beyond me. The bird passed me within thirty yards: I raised my gun and endeavoured to point the weapon in the direction of the quarry, but it was too dark! I could not find the phantom-like creature; nor was I "on" it until the apparition was well out of range. I must confess that I did not deeply regret the circumstance, for if my theory be correct, this was the hen bird, and would shortly be followed by a cock. Whether this was so or not I cannot tell; but it is certain that within two or three minutes I heard the sounds of a second bird's approach: there it was, sailing along in the very track of the first. I felt that I really must shoot this time. I should not attempt to sight it, that was clearly impracticable by this light, or rather in this gloom: I must therefore bring my gun up to the shoulder and fire, hoping for the best. This proved to be a wise proceeding, for at the sound of the shot the passing spectre stayed its flight through the air, and assuming that sorrowful, torn-rag appearance that a bird shot in mid flight wears, came tumbling at my feet, a dead woodcock, and a fine one withal.

It was enough. I felt that the tiaga was a delight-

ful thing to watch, but that at this advanced season it could not be right to murder the poor creatures in the midst of their love functions, and I resolved to kill no more. But as a spectator, I stayed on and watched with the greatest delight, and as it became darker and darker, and each apparition as it approached was more weird and spectre-like than the last, I lapsed into a condition which may be described as that of great ripeness for psychical research: I felt myself in ghost-land. If any of my friends had chanced to expire during that hour, I should most certainly have had a tale to tell of a supernatural visit; but happily they did not provide me with this experience; they all kept well and hearty, and no ghost outside my own circle appeared to be aware of the favourable condition of mind under which I might have been caught; which was a pity, for I was just in the mood to see and accept not only my own friends, but any one else's relations from the spectre world, if such had been wandering by that way. I was thus immersed in an atmosphere of the supernatural: perhaps I was half asleep: at all events, I was quite on the look-out for a ghost or two, when suddenly a something emerged from the gloom of the forest just in front of me. In an instant my nerves were all a-tingling, and if my hair did not

stand on end, that was merely because there was a heavy fur cap over it, which kept it down. Which of my friends was dead, and had come to acquaint me with the sad news? In an instant my mind was busy over a mental march-past of all my old friends and associates; surely it was not dear old H——, who was in India, and whom I had not seen since our school chum-days? Oh, no, no, not H——! Nor, in pity, B——, my fidus Achates, who dwelt in far-off London town, and had never had a day's illness in his hearty life: it could not be he! See, it approaches . . . it raises its arm . . . it speaks! . . .

"I say, F——, old chap, where's your flask? I'm half dead with cold." Confound that fellow A——, there's no poetry in him.

Now I come to think of it, I don't believe I ever disclosed to A—— that I had mistaken him for a ghost; few men are less like one than A——, who is very much alive indeed, and his proceedings on this occasion in connection with my flask were exhaustive and complete. He was very cold: I was not; which proves that it is better to sit and dream about ghosts, if you wish to keep yourself warm, than to worry over the state of the thermometer. A——, with his usual generosity, had placed me in the best position, with

the natural consequences: he had seen no woodcock. Before dismissing the subject of the tiaga, I should mention that the birds, if not shot at, invariably fly back over the same spot passed by them on the outward journey, after an interval; and that they love to return to the same portion of the wood, year after year, for the annual spring function which I have described.

There still remains a bird, which I have not as yet mentioned as one of the victims of Russian sportsmen during the spring season: the tree partridge, or riabchik. This useful bird affords a standing dish at every Russian dinner table through the winter and spring. No restaurant, no private establishment, dreams of making up a dinner without including in the *menu* the inevitable riabchik. The bird is, in the first place, delicious eating; and is besides so common in certain portions of the empire that it can be bought, frozen, at a very low figure. The sporting peasants bring up to town hundreds of sledge-loads of frozen riabchiks, and a restaurant or large private establishment will think nothing of purchasing an entire sledge-load of these toothsome partridges, in their frozen condition, for gradual consumption during winter and spring when other game is scarce. Roast

riabchik is an article of which the palate never wearies ; hence it forms an item in the daily *menu* of thousands, and, as I have pointed out, some never dream of omitting it. In the Ostermanch district, however, and in fact within a hundred-mile radius of St. Petersburg, the tree partridge, though existing, is by no means common. He appears occasionally at a battue, when the beat happens to take place in his favourite sanctuary, the "big" woods: that is, a corner of the forest where the pine trees are tall and luxuriant. When startled by the beaters he will leave his perch and fly as far as the cutting wherein the sportsmen are lurking; there he settles, and is sometimes "potted" by the sportsmen aforesaid. If allowed to take flight once more, he will cross the cutting at an almost inconceivable rate of speed. Indeed, so rapidly does he fly, that the best of shots is proud to be able to boast that he has succeeded in stopping one as it darted like a lightning-flash across the narrow cutting. After the tiaga, then, we endeavoured to circumvent a riabchik or two in the usual manner adopted in spring-time. It was exceedingly simple; a likely spot was first chosen, in the very heart of the densest portion of the forest, and here A—— and I, together with Matvei, took up our

position. Matvei then produced a strange little object which he called a "riabchik whistle." It gave forth the tiniest possible sound, pitched very high indeed, and this, I was informed, was an exact reproduction of the whistle of the tree partridge. Apparently this was the case; for after a long half-hour spent in sitting and whistling, our patience was rewarded by the sudden arrival of first one and then two or three riabchiks. They came along quite silently, like so many little ghosts: darted into the tree-tops just over our very heads, and commenced to peer about in all directions, evidently anxious to find the companion who had so persistently summoned them to the spot, and was now so unaccountably silent.

Alas! for their credulity, and for the artfulness of deceitful man. Two of them perished for their devotion to duty, or perhaps I should rather say, to "the sex;" for we and our whistling probably figured in their minds as distressed maiden ladies of the family, anxious to become wives. The third riabchik, who escaped, will hesitate, I should think, before he responds again to the call of a lady in distress.

The pursuit of the riabchik in spring-time is thus a very simple matter, and there is nothing in his proceedings, either at this or any other period of his

career, characteristic enough to call for detailed description in this place. By far the greater portion of his life is passed at the extreme tops of the pines, and I have never yet seen one rise from the ground. I have heard, however, that the hen bird builds her nest—not in the trees, but in the thick cover below. Riabchiks are quiet, mysterious birds, tame enough and not very interesting, and they are not often seen excepting by the sportsman who haunts their favourite resorts with his rook-rifle; for this is the weapon which Ivan Ivanovitch, who lives by their destruction, finds to be the cheapest and most efficacious engine for his purpose. I need scarcely add that Ivan becomes, with constant practice, a most unerring shot: he cannot afford to miss. The flesh of the riabchik is quite white and of delicious flavour; in size he is about the same as the ordinary English partridge. I have reason to believe that the riabchik as a species labours under the singular delusion that when perched upon the summit of its beloved pine-tree it is invisible to the human eye. If this theory is not correct, I should like to learn why the bird will invariably allow the sportsman to stand and stare at it from below, refusing to take wing, often enough, until it has been shot at and missed.

It was on my way home after the base deception practised upon unsuspecting tree-partridges which I have just described, that I accomplished what I believe to have been a unique performance of its kind: in a word, I shot an otter *flying*. If any of my readers have done this I should be glad to hear of it. It was in this wise: A—— and I separated on the way home when we reached the river, he taking to the right and I to the left; for there were ducks about, and these had not as yet paired, and might therefore, with the aid of an elastic conscience, still be shot. I think I shot two or three (for which I hope I may be forgiven, but I have my doubts!), and was walking slowly along the bank with my conscience in a condition of only partial repose, when suddenly I became aware of the most extraordinary noises produced by some animal whose identity I did not, at the first moment, determine. The sound consisted of a series of shrill cries, such as I had never heard before, and seemed to come from a point about a quarter of a mile away from me. The noise was so unfamiliar to me that, without any better reason for jumping to the conclusion than that I thought I knew most wood-calls and did not recognise this, I made up my mind that the creature responsible for it

was an otter—an animal which I had never seen and which is exceedingly rare in the Ostermanch river. It happened that the stream at this point took a double bend, forming a figure like the letter S. The otter, as I could plainly distinguish, was at the extreme northern point of the S, while I was far away south. I could take a short cut across country, and so could he, if he did not object to dry land. Devoutly hoping that this was actually his intention, therefore, I put on all the speed I could, and ran for the point at which, if the otter too should be making for it, we were bound to meet—separated only by the width of the river. As I ran, at a pace which would have caused the most agile of lamplighters, had he witnessed it, to go home and reconsider his position, the cries waxed louder and louder: to my delight I realised that the animal was, sure enough, making the land journey, exactly as was expected of him, probably to save himself a far longer one by water; and was rushing, so to speak, to my arms. As I reached my bank he reached his, which was a high one, six or seven feet above water level. Seeing me, the creature instantly took the neatest possible header, a move which I checkmated as neatly by putting a charge of duck-shot into his neck as he journeyed

through the air. On reaching the water my friend tried to dive, but was unable, being too sorely wounded for any further diving this side of Styx; whereupon I gave him the *coup-de-grâce*, and he floated down-stream, a defunct otter, and was ignominiously fished out, with the aid of a long sapling, by the panting Matvei, who had followed me to the best of his ability in my mad career; Finns cannot run, it is not in their deliberate, philosophical nature to hurry themselves, and poor old Matvei panted for hours after his unwonted exercise. In truth it was a fine otter! I gaze on his stuffed form as I write, and run once again, on memory's cinder path, that exciting race to the river bank. I often run that race: it is a joy and a pride to me for ever, and justly so; for, as I said before, it is not every man who can boast of having shot an otter flying.

I really must record a certain episode which happened at the close of this particular expedition, though it has no immediate connection with woodcocks, otters, or any other game.

A—— and I were riding home, mounted upon two little Finn ponies, which were not more excruciatingly incisive about the backbone, nor yet less, than the average. Now, A—— and I had been up for three

consecutive nights in the pursuit of capercailzie, woodcock, and "other delights" of a similar character, and though we had snatched an occasional siesta during the daytime, these short naps altogether did not even approximately amount to one respectable night's rest; so that we were fairly two whole nights behind our proper sleep rations. Under these circumstances, we were not more wide-awake than the constant anguish of close proximity to the backbone of a Finn pony compelled us to be: in a word, we jogged along, most of the way, fast asleep. Now, a Finn pony is nothing if he is not independent. He is accustomed to draw a cart or sledge containing a sleeping or intoxicated master: this is his mission in life; he is therefore expected to take the initiative in all matters connected with his professional duties, rather than stop and rouse the somnolent individual in nominal authority in order to ask his advice in an emergency. Hence, when we reached a portion of the high road which was even below the average infamy of Russian country roads, and in which the little nags would have been obliged to wade up to their knees in mud and rubbish, our intelligent steeds immediately sought and found an alternative. They deftly scrambled over the ditch which separated the

road from the adjoining rough meadow land, and proceeded to trot peacefully along the half moor half meadow, until such time as the high road should resume its likeness "as sich." We awoke to the fact that the ponies had left the road, and were half wading and half jumping over the ditch, but, in sleepy reliance upon their good intentions and intelligent care for our best interests, we soon dozed off again. Now, if that meadow had been merely a flat expanse of grass or heather, unbroken by gulley or ditch, all would have been well; we should have returned in due course to the road, under the auspices of our careful quadrupeds, and proceeded upon our way without adventure. But things went contrariwise. Half a mile from the point at which we left the road, the plain or field to which our steeds had betaken themselves was bisected by a widish ditch of water, the accumulation of drainage from melted snow and ice; its depth being about three feet and its width perhaps ten. I am not able to state, for I was fast asleep until the climax came, what preliminary consultations or heart-sinkings may have preceded the resolution of those ponies (who belonged to a non-jumping race), to leap that ditch: probably, like sensible creatures, they accepted the

inevitable; anyhow, it is certain that they *did* make up their minds to "take" it, rather than return to the horrible road. The first thing I was aware of was, that my steed had stopped suddenly, and that I was snatching convulsively at his mane and nose as I proceeded on my journey without him. . . . Ah, well, I did not go in very deep, personally, for my excellent pony had refused the leap while there was yet room to deposit me half on land and half in sea; but I have ever been grateful to what, at first, appeared to be an unkind destiny, but which was in reality a blessing in disguise, for causing my sudden and complete awakening at that moment, even though the method employed was, perhaps, a trifle rough and bracing; for I would not have missed the spectacle provided for me at that moment by A—— and his pony for all the wealth of Ind. A——'s animal had been jogging along some fifteen or twenty paces in the rear of my own, and rather to my left; consequently, when I scrambled to my feet, A—— and his steed were just approaching the ditch: A—— still fast asleep above, the little horse very wide awake beneath, and full of determination to achieve the leap in the accomplishment of which its companion had so conspicuously failed, or to perish in the attempt. Did I wake A——

and apprise him of the danger and disaster impending? Gentle reader, I did not: you would have done so, I feel sure; but I regret to say I am not, or was not then, guided by any humanitarian motives whatever; on the contrary, I gladly, gleefully, nay, delightedly permitted A—— to go to his doom all unwarned. Gathering itself together the gallant little animal rushed at the ditch, and rose to it with a sudden wild bound which might have unhorsed a cowboy. Now A——, with all his virtues, is not a cowboy, and his fate was never for a moment in doubt. As his steed rose to the leap, A—— immediately rolled off sideways. Feeling himself going he opened his eyes with a sleepy but startled look, which quickly changed into an expression of the deepest anguish as he felt himself coming in contact with the cold water. It was all over in a moment. The proud steed, which had most meritoriously cleared the dyke, was standing safe and sound on the far side, neighing triumphantly for its less courageous companion; but where was my poor friend A——? Alas! the cruel waters had closed over his young head!

> "Where were ye, nymphs, when the remorseless deep
> Closed o'er the head of my loved Lycidas?"

They were not by on this occasion either! they

never are. It seems to me those nymphs shamefully neglect their duties: they ought to be sent about their business and some new nymphs got.

When A—— emerged from that ditch, which he did as soon as ever circumstances permitted, he was very very wet, and very very angry. . . . As for me, I was a mere moving mass of sympathy and horror, to all outward appearances; but my real self just hugged itself with delight, and does so still whenever it recalls the scene. A—— did not fall asleep again after this episode: it seemed to exert a rousing effect upon his system, as, indeed, it did upon my own; I remember I was obliged to ride some distance behind for quite a long while in order to laugh as much as my soul required, which was a very great deal!

I have had many entertaining adventures with Finn ponies, but I never experienced anything which, for refreshing originality, quite came up to a circumstance which a friend related to me as having actually happened to himself. He was just about to start, he said, one very dark night, for the blackcock tok: he was to ride, and the pony was ready and waiting. The keeper had mounted his steed, and my friend in due course proceeded to do the same. So dark was it, however, that he was not aware that the pony stood

with its tail where he expected its head to be: the intelligent creature had its own ideas as to the proper direction to be taken for the best blackcock tok, and had quietly turned round, in the darkness, unnoticed. Consequently, it was not until the animal moved forward, my friend being still occupied groping for the bridle, and deposited him—to his immense surprise—over its tail, that he realised the fact that he had mounted it back to front. With this matchless anecdote I will conclude; if the tale is not true, it is a pity—it ought to be!

VIII

SOLITARY SNIPE

In many respects the "double" or "great" snipe, or, as he is generally called in England, the solitary snipe (though his tastes are the reverse of solitary), is of all birds the most lovable. For one thing, he is not in the least degree afraid of man, though, I am bound to say, he has every reason to be so; for no sooner does he appear upon the scene, which, in Russia, is but for a fortnight in the whole year, than every man and youth who can possess himself of a gun is out and about after him, intent upon his destruction. The double, kind soul! does not resent this treatment; on the contrary, he appears to quite enjoy being shot at and missed, and, if satisfied that "the man with the stick" is but taking his pleasure—and is pretty harmless, though noisy withal, he will gladly settle again and again, in order to give the would-be sportsman another and another chance. He is like his small relative, jack snipe, in this respect. The latter amiable little

bird has helped the writer, when a boy, to many an exciting hour's sport. Well do I remember one occasion—I think it was the first on which I was promoted from the sparrow-family-shot to the pride and joy of being allowed to try my fortune upon any snipe or other flying thing that I could find in a day's wandering by the "gulley" side. I had no dog, I remember, and no keeper; neither would trust his life to my tender mercies. But what are such little obstacles in the path of the true enthusiast? I felt that if a snipe existed in the gulley, I should tramp every yard of the ground until I found it. Well, I did find it, and nobly and generously did that bird behave towards me. I soon discovered that a snap shot at a little fidgety flying snipe was a very different matter to the deliberate business of aiming at a family of sparrows, which have been basely induced to afford a good easy mark by the present of a mass of crumbs sprinkled carefully over an area of two feet square. When first my friend Mr. Jack Snipe rose from the ground at my feet, I was so flurried that I did not think of shooting. However, this did not matter a bit, for the bird was far too generous to take advantage of a fact fairly attributable to my youth and inexperience. Consequently, seeing that I was not

ready, it settled forty yards further on. I followed, splashing madly through the ankle-deep water in my haste to get nice and close before Jack should think it time to make another move, and resolved that some powder should burn this time, whatever happened. Any but the most friendly and confiding of birds would have been frightened out of its wits by my floundering, but not so my kind friend. On the contrary, he allowed me to approach within ten yards, and then rose lazily and with a little whistle, as one would say, "Shoot away, I like it!"

I shot. The first barrel discharged itself into the ground five yards or so from my feet, while the second despatched its contents I know not whither. At all events, the jack snipe was perfectly unharmed, and promptly did what might be expected of a generous adversary—it settled and waited for me. The reader need not follow that bird as I did, all day long. I will merely record that he behaved in the handsomest manner; never once going further than one hundred yards at a flight, and seldom taking wing before he had allowed me to approach well within shooting-distance. We parted eventually, for I was obliged to return; but we did so with feelings of mutual good-will and cordiality unsullied by the slightest suspicion

of coldness, and of course, entirely undisturbed by the shedding of blood.

The double snipe shares this delightful friendliness of disposition, as I have said, with his smaller relative. He is a far larger bird, larger than the ordinary snipe, indeed, and approaching to within measurable distance of the bulk of the woodcock. In appearance he is much like the ordinary snipe, but his breast, instead of being white as is the case with the latter variety, is a speckled grey. Here the likeness ends, for in personal characteristics he is as unlike his timid and extremely agile cousin the ordinary snipe as the tortoise is to the hare.

The double breeds somewhere in the far north, which is his home from nesting time until about the end of August. Then, in flocks of hundreds, if not thousands, he migrates in a south-easterly direction, passing over the northern and central parts of Russia, and spreading himself over the favourable portions of the country, as he passes, for a few day's rest and feasting time *en route*. And indeed, he badly needs this period of rest and feeding, for he arrives in the most pitiable and emaciated condition possible to imagine. Once settled, however, the double—better than any other bird living—understands how to make

the most of his time and enjoy the good things which come to hand. *Gourmand* to the backbone, he takes up his quarters in a dry rich soil—he does not love the swamp like his relatives jack and the ordinary—pushes in his long bill and devotes himself to the occupation of steady luscious suction, until he finds himself so fat that when the time comes, ten days or so after his arrival, for Mr. Double to pack up his effects and take his departure, the poor *gourmand* finds that it is not so easy to raise his corpulent form from the ground, and that—having effected this—he has the greatest difficulty in propelling that form through space in the required direction.

But poor Mr. Double does not always enjoy the opportunity to grow fat and lazy; for if his evil star has chanced to bring him, for his sins, near town or village, and he has selected such a dangerous locality for his fortnight of well-earned rest and refreshment, then, alas! for him. About the 20th August (Russian style) all who are interested in sport begin to be upon the look-out for the arrival of the first harbingers of the double bands. No sooner is a bird found than the report is set afoot that "doubles are in!" In St. Petersburg members of shooting clubs are all ready for them. Old members who never stir from

home for any other bird or beast's sake, bring out their guns and order their cartridges—tempted out to their annual day after the doubles. Young sportsmen who have, by this time, pretty nearly cleared off all the unfortunate black game, willow-grouse, &c., with which the resources of their clubs have provided them, are all agog once more. Keepers are alert and active, finding and marking down the birds ready for the arrival of their employers. In the villages, Ivan Ivanovitch, who is the sportsman of the district, if game is not preserved, and the poacher if it is, is busy too. So is his old cur, who knows well enough what is expected of him, and can find (yea, and catch!) a double with the best. Ivan Ivanovitch does not waste powder and shot, and if *Sharik* the dog can catch a fat double or two, or a dozen, why, so much the better and cheaper for Ivan, who has educated *Sharik* well.

If the village cannot boast of an Ivan Ivanovitch, it is good for the doubles, who have chosen its vicinity for their halting-place. Here they may settle, and rest and feast in peace, expanding daily in girth and enjoying life with perfect impunity, until the *ultima hora*, when a September night frost or a cold wind comes to remind them that life is not all cakes

and ale, but that part of it has to be expended in fleeing south before the terrors of a too rapidly advancing winter. I shall best describe the delights of a day spent in the pursuit of this lovable bird by recording my own experiences.

Ostermanch is the *beau-idéal* of all that a wild moorland "shoot" should be. The only objection to it is, that it lies too far from the capital—thirty-five miles, every inch of which must be driven or ridden, for there are no railways in that direction. In the winter this is all right, for with sledge roads to drive along, life is a sweet dream! But in summer, or, worse still, in spring and autumn, he who starts from St. Petersburg essaying to reach Ostermanch by cart or *tarantass*, and starting perhaps in enthusiastic vein, will find after the first five miles two things—the first, that his high spirits have melted down and escaped at his boots; and secondly, that the cushions which he had thought so delightfully soft have become most unaccountably hard. After the seventeen miles which form the first half of his drive, he will wish he had never been born. The last few miles he will pass in picking himself up from the bottom of the cart, and replacing himself upon the hay cushions which have assumed a shape such as to render that formality a

mere waste of time; for, no sooner is he perched on the slippery, sloping things, than he is promptly jolted off again. The friends who induced him to adventure this dreadful journey, himself for being so foolish as to agree to it, and all the "fiends that plagued him so," such as the driver who aims with unerring accuracy for each hole and rut, the horses which will not be pulled up for anything under the depth and width of a grave, all come in for their share of the maledictions, which, if he does not utter them, he feels.

We, my friend and I, had chosen to entrust our bones to a *tarantass*, this being an infinitely superior vehicle to the common *telega*. Neither have springs; but, whereas the *telega* is merely an open box slung on wheels, the *tarantass* is a *telega* with the added advantages of a hood for cover and back, and two long poles upon which the cart is slung, and which, giving to the jolts, serve the office of rude springs. I thought the *tarantass* delightfully comfortable at first, and started upon that journey with all the gaiety and enthusiasm of my nature showing at their very best. This pleasant state of things lasted until the first big jolt came. Now, whether it was my gun case which, at this point, jumped up from the bottom of the *telega* and hit me on the chin; or whether it was my head,

which just then appeared to leave its proper place on my shoulders and dash itself against the top of the hood; or whether it was A——'s setter which flew to my arms, or A——'s self who was deposited (after violently hacking me on both shins) upon my knee, I do not know. But this I know, that my gaiety from that moment began to subside. We had three horses, animals which for energy and pluck surpassed anything I have ever seen; but they had one great fault. When they saw a larger-than-ordinary rut they put on all the speed they knew, jumped the hole themselves, and with a slight turn at the right moment, steered the particular wheel over which *I* sat with faultless precision into the deepest part of it. This sort of thing soon reduced me to a condition of mind bordering upon frenzy. The top of my head was aching from perpetual contact with the roof. The hay with which the cushion was stuffed had all migrated to A——'s side of the vehicle, so that each jolt caused me most exquisite torture. By the time the half-way house was reached I was of all men the most miserable. As for A——, the wretch was calmly sleeping—he was accustomed to this sort of thing—it hushed him to rest! And now I was to exemplify the fact that, even under the most trying

conditions, mind may triumph over matter. I vacated my place beside A——, and took up a perilous position on the coach-box (a board nailed across the cart), with my back to the horses. I have mentioned that the hay, my share of the hay in the cushion, had basely deserted me, and gone over to A——'s side, rendering his half of the cushion an abode of Elysian delight. But being perched on the top of Olympus, and all unconscious of the priceless value of his position (since slumber had him), and, furthermore, being deprived of the support which my presence beside him had afforded to his person, A—— gradually but steadily slid down the *facilis descensus* which lay between his seat and mine. In a word, A—— slipped into my cushionless half, while I slipped into his doubly-cushioned, luxurious corner. Needless to say, that A—— very speedily awoke; but by that time my eyes were closed, not too tight, however, to prevent the enjoyment which the spectacle of A—— being bobbed about like a pea on a drum-head afforded them. I saw his head reach the woodwork of the hood above us; I observed his body descend with sledge-hammer force against the bare boards of the seat; I saw A——'s setter precipitate himself into his master's waistcoat; and I heard language—language which might have caused a

blight, and which was "sufficiently so" to wake a strong sleeper—and yet I slumbered on. . . . But this could *not* last *for ever*. A——'s intelligence, clouded for a while by slumber, was by this time fairly *jogged* once more into its usual condition of brightness. First I observed him fumbling about for his share of hay. Then he looked at the driver and at the roadside. Then he stared long and fixedly at me. At last he said—

"Look here, old chap, I know you're not asleep through all this—besides, you're grinning—how the deuce did you get that side? Didn't we start the other way?"

I replied that I supposed I had been jogged there, but made a mental resolution, that howsoever I may have acquired my present position, I intended to stick to it, and should not relinquish it except to *force majeure*.

How this promising-looking altercation might have continued I cannot conjecture, for at that very moment the three horses were aiming the left hind wheel of the *tarantass* into a hole perilously near the ditch, and, in an instant, the vehicle gave a lurch, one side descended with a crash into the abyss, the horses stopped short, I followed A—— into space accom-

panied by dog, gun-cases, baskets of food, and a heavy box of cartridges which kept itself dry by alighting on the small of my back—and our conversation received a check.

Our united exertions soon restored the *tarantass* to its proper position; guns were picked up, the cartridge-box—not damaged by contact with my backbone—was stowed away once more; the rest of the impedimenta was collected and packed away; and lastly A——, without a word, took the cushion and readjusted the hay, resuming his seat on his original side. Then we started once more and completed our journey without further adventure. Oh, it was a glorious drive! What if heads swam and bones ached? what if shins were pounded by gun-cases? At least we had learned what the coppers feel like when they are shaken up in the money-box, and is it nothing to have made such a discovery?

We crawled from that *tarantass* two ruins of our former selves, having spent four hours in it without a moment's rest, excepting the delightful change which our flight over the ditch had afforded us. I remember as I jolted along being haunted by a couplet which came into my head and would not go out again—not all the jogging in the world would oust

it; on the contrary, it made tunes out of the jolts and sang itself to them:—

"A man must be an arrant ass
To drive twice in a *tarantass*."

However, here we were at last, at that Paradise of shooting-boxes—Ostermanch! The keepers met us at the door beaming as broadly as their stolid Finnish countenances ever condescended to beam.

"Any doubles?" was our first question.

"*Yest*" (there are), was the laconic reply.

"Many?"

"*Doopiley yest!*" (there are doubles) said Matvei, who is a gentleman not given to wasting his words. Those, however, who knew Matvei, and A—— was one of these, understood that when Matvei said "There are doubles," one might fairly expect to find a good many of them.

A bath and supper restored lost gaiety, and—it being now nine o'clock, and the keepers having strict orders to wake us at four—we retired for the night.

The next day was the 28th August, one of the four or five very best days for doubles. The morning broke splendidly, bright and warm, but with a fresh

breeze to improve the scent. Keepers and dogs were awaiting us as we sallied forth at five o'clock, and we stepped out into the full glory of an early autumn morning. How the dew flashed and sparkled in the untrodden grass! How the larks were singing, and what a lovely light fell upon the dark circle of tall pines which surrounds every open space in Russia, either at a distance or close at hand. The dogs—two English setters, "Bob" and "York;" a Russian-bred mongrel whose mother was a cur, but whose father was supposed to be York aforesaid; and a Russian pointer—the dogs were barking and yelping in spite of all attempts to hush them, for their enthusiasm was more than they could contain in silence. A—— and I and the two keepers were the human contingent—and so, a procession of yelping dogs and whistling scolding men, we started for the first "double" field. This was not more than half a mile from the house, and the dogs were as hopelessly wild and intractable when it was reached as they had been at starting.

"This field generally holds a few!" said A——, indicating the place, which seemed to me about as unlikely-looking a spot for game, especially snipe of any kind, as he could well have chosen.

The dogs thought so too, for they evidently had not the faintest idea of finding game, as they raced madly over the ground, pursued by the angry whistling and calling of Matvei and Lákoo, who invited them in English to "tek ti," (take time!) an invitation which was not accepted until, suddenly, at a distance of one foot from York's nose, two birds—whose aspect was strange to me—rose from the ground, flew lazily to a distance of thirty-five yards or so, and settled again. In an instant, Bob, York, Sharik (the cur), and Karaool the pointer, were transformed into four motionless statues. Bob and York slightly wagged as to their tails, for the English setter *will* not, at first, take a double *au sérieux*; indeed, all through this day, these two dogs worked with a kindly indulgent air, as though making a concession in finding and pointing these ridiculous Russian birds which were not even woodcock.

We had, of course, marked down the birds with accuracy, and with beating heart I obeyed A——'s injunction to walk straight up to the spot where they had settled, and put them up by myself, whilst he himself stood by the dogs to see that their feelings were not too many for them at this early stage of the proceedings. So I cocked my gun, and approached

the place where I knew one of the doubles had settled. He was nowhere to be seen, though I looked in every direction. I was just about to request A—— to let one of the dogs discover his whereabouts when I saw a sight which made me roar with laughter. Not a yard and a half from my feet stood a large snipe. To say that my presence did not alarm him, would be to express in very inadequate language his utter indifference—his almost insulting disregard. He would glance at me for a moment, then dig his long bill into the soft ground, and enjoy a short suck; then hop an inch or two further, or nearer towards me—it was all the same to him! and repeat the process.

"Throw your cap at him!" said A——.

After watching this exceedingly cool specimen of bird-life for a short while, I did throw—or rather tossed my cap in his direction, when at last he condescended to raise himself with great deliberation from the earth, and flutter slowly away—plumping down again some thirty yards further on.

"Why didn't you shoot, man?" cried A——.

"My dear fellow, I couldn't do it!" I said, "you might as well tie him by the leg to your bed-post and do it comfortably at home!"

"Oh, bosh!" said A—— (who is a rude fellow!) "you

must swallow your feelings!—that's rather a fat one and won't fly—wait till we get one that's just arrived!"

To make a long story short, I *did* swallow my feelings, and shot that very double when he rose a third time. He did this with an aggrieved air, as though he would say, "Oh *do* leave a fellow alone, and let him have his breakfast in peace!" He winged lazily along for thirty yards, and was about to settle once more, when I put an end to any further breakfasting on his part—and, indeed, none too soon, for he was literally bursting with fat, and did actually burst (that is, his skin did), when he fell to the earth, exuding a thick oil as I picked him up.

"Ah!" said Matvei—stowing the disgustingly greedy bird away in the game-bag—"he is fat! he has lived here a week!"

I should have thought a month or two of hard eating would scarcely have sufficed to make such an object of him!

But meanwhile all four of the dogs are busy on a scent, and in an instant Sharik and Karaool stop dead and stiffen, Bob and York—as in duty bound—backing them, but wagging the tail of derision.

Now A—— is an excellent fellow, but by no means an unerring marksman; and when, at this instant, two

doubles rose together, both fat ones, he killed one and missed the other; though a flying haystack, if such existed, would have been an equally difficult shot. I expected that this time at least, having been shot at, and possibly touched, the double would make up his mind to go no more a-roving in this field, at all events — would, in fact, decamp altogether. But to my astonishment the gallant bird was of a different opinion. Did he say to himself, "What man has missed man *may* miss"? or did he determine to risk his whole skin for his stomach's sake alone? saying, "This field is a luscious field. They may shoot me, or they may miss me: but I do not quit this field"? Whatever he may have thought, the upshot of his reflections was, that he incontinently settled again, and was shot. We shot eleven in that field—all fat ones; it was a batch of week-old doubles. We could have caught several of them, had we desired to do so, in our caps, so lazy and tame were they. Matvei did catch one in this way, but was naturally ordered to let it go. Did fear lend it wings, reader, think you? On the contrary, it fluttered fifty yards away, and then waited to be shot, in which matter it was accommodated.

Finnish keepers, although possessing many excel-

lent qualities, are not endowed with the true instincts of the sportsman, as regarded from a British point of view. Once or twice Matvei, seeing me watching a double which showed no disposition to take wing, whispered, "*Strelyai!*" (shoot!) Matvei's great idea being to make sure of your quarry, no matter how his destruction shall have been accomplished. There is an old picture in *Punch*, of a bygone day, showing a French sportsman following with his gun the movements of a pheasant running along the ground close to him. An English keeper is saying to this Nimrod, "Don't shoot him running, sir, don't shoot him running!"

"No, *mon ami*," says Monsieur, "no, I veel vait till he stop!" This gentleman would have had grand sport in that field of fat doubles.

But the next batch we came across, though equally friendly and confiding as to settling when missed, gave us far better sport. They had arrived lately—perhaps this very night—and were light and active, flying—in some instances—almost like their smaller relatives the ordinary snipe, with a turn and a twist which was somewhat baffling after the steady-going tactics of their plump neighbours. We both missed several of these, but they bore us no ill-will, and with

the exception of one, which was probably touched, always gave us another opportunity.

Before three o'clock in the afternoon, at which hour we had decided to close the proceedings, twenty brace of these tasty morsels had bitten the dust. Besides doubles we had, however, a varied assortment of other birds. First and foremost we had a fine full-grown young capercailzie, which had had the misfortune to be wandering far from his mamma and sisters, in exactly that portion of the wood which we had crossed in order to go from one double-field to another. He had risen with a crashing of boughs which sent my heart into my mouth, some forty yards from us in the dense birch growth. I did not see him. "*Gluhàr! strelyai!*" (shoot! it's a capercailzie!) shouted Matvei excitedly, and shoot we did, discharging four barrels into the vista of green boughs before us. Poor capercailzie!—vast as was the space on each side of him, and above and below him, into which the shot might have dispersed, it was not wide enough but that a fateful little pellet must needs burrow its way through the leaves exactly in the direction of his wing joint, and break it! A thud in the distance told us the joyful news that some one's bullet had found its billet, and we rushed

up in time to see the huge bird running as hard as it could lay legs to the ground, now bending its long thick neck in a vain attempt to hide itself, now stretching it to the fullest extent as it watched our pursuit. Running in this way, with its long legs and long outstretched neck, the magnificent bird looked perfectly immense. The sight was too much for old Karaool (bad dog !) and he started off in chase, catching and killing the capercailzie in no time, a sin which was condoned in this instance, for we should have been obliged to shoot it as it ran, which is always an unpleasant proceeding.

Besides this grand specimen, we had a brace of willow-grouse, and a brace and a half of black game, besides one or two ruffs (ruffless at this season), and a single, or ordinary snipe.

The country over which we had shot, was of varied character, though always flat. Birch spinnies and belts of tall pine forest land were the prevailing feature, the "double ground" forming a very minute proportion of the whole. There was some beautiful moorland still covered, though late in the season, with purple bilberry; and here we might undoubtedly have found numbers of willow-grouse and black game, had we hunted diligently for them ; but we were after

doubles, and had no time for anything commonplace. As for the extent of the Ostermanch shoot, A—— informed me that from the centre of the property a man might ride in any direction for fifteen versts, about ten miles, and still be within the Ostermanch clubs' limits. Part of this would, of course, consist of almost impenetrable forest; but a large proportion contained ideal cover for the ordinary wood-game of the country. The villages on the estate were all Finnish, the inhabitants, for the most part, knowing no Russian—that of our keeper being of the most "broken" description imaginable. The Finns seemed to be a most quiet, inoffensive, patient set of men and women, living frugal, contented lives, and manufacturing butter in enormous qualities for the St. Petersburg market. But I must return to my subject, upon which I have a few more words to say.

The double engages in an interesting function during pairing time in the spring. He, like the blackcock, capercailzie, woodcock, and many other birds, holds a spring tournament, known, as already explained, as the *tok*. But, unlike the blackcock, who, as I have described in a former chapter, are not remarkable for personal courage, and whose tournaments consist of more bounce than bloodshed, the double when

engaged in challenging and fighting his adversaries is very much in earnest. His battles are real battles, and he makes his enemies' blood to flow like water. I have never been far enough north to have an opportunity of observing a snipe-tournament; but an eye-witness has described the scene to me, and I will now endeavour to reproduce it for the benefit of my readers. The tournament was held in an open space of some fifty yards square. This had been a swamp in summer, but was now covered with a hard groundwork of snow, which had been well trampled down by birds of every kind. There was no vegetation, save here and there a blade or two of dead yellow grass, sticking up mournful and forlorn through the ice. In the midst of this small square space, my friend had had prepared a *shalaska*, or small conical tent made of fir boughs, in which to sit and watch the *tok*. He describes how the doubles arrived in twos and threes, very early in the morning, and without any preliminary hectoring or challenging of one another, commenced at once, and apparently quite promiscuously, to attack one another with the greatest fury, the whole square being very quickly covered with pairs of these usually peaceful and good-natured birds, flying at one another like so many incarnate

N

furies, and very frequently maiming and even killing their adversaries. When one double had succeeded in putting to flight or rendering *hors de combat* the particular rival he had selected as his first victim, he would promptly attack his next-door neighbour, whether the latter happened to be engaged upon another quarrel or not. So intent were these little "spitfires" upon murdering one another, that when my friend stepped forth from his *shalaska*, having seen sufficient bloodshed, they took no notice whatever of his presence; in fact, one or two of them looked as though they had half a mind to pitch into *him*. He declares that he actually raised one fighting pair with his foot without prevailing upon either warrior to desist from the combat. He also fired his gun into the air, but not a bird left the field on that account, though they stopped fighting for an instant to listen.

Truly the double is a "lion, when roused!" Who would credit the little, fat, inoffensive creatures, whose peaceful habits in summer time I have chronicled above, with so truculent a manner of dealing with rival suitors? I believe there exists no bird, with one exception, whose heart is so large, or which has so strong a taste for fighting, as the double. That

exception is the ruff, the beautiful mate of the reeve. This bird during spring-time is, I believe, a perfect demon of ferocity. In the courting season he is decorated with the most beautiful Elizabethan ruff of feathers, no one bird being in the least like another as to the colouring of that ornament. He is indeed a beautiful bird in spring-time;—but, alas! when summer comes and the humdrum family life begins, fighting and courting are over and—*Ichabod!* the glory of his ruff-encircled neck is departed too, and he becomes the most commonplace of birds, smooth-feathered, and dull and quiet to look upon.

The double *tok* which I have described took place near Archangel, where the species breed in great numbers. My friend, who had lived in that far-away town, informed me that he had frequently shot doubles in his garden, and that it was a common circumstance to see the taller trees close to the houses, and in the very midst of the town, covered with roosting blackcock.

So much for the double—dear bird!—and the manner of his living and dying. After death his praise passeth words. Given a cook who understands him, there is no bird—deliberately, I repeat it—*no* bird which may be compared to this

bird. *Verb. sap.* Let him answer me who has essayed it.

As we trudged, weary but delighted, towards the hospitable lodge where cold water awaited us, and dinner, my couplet of the previous evening ran riot within my brain—

> "A man must be an arrant ass
> Who goes twice in a *tarantass*;"

and I resolved that A—— should have that murderous vehicle to himself, if he pleased, with all the hay and the whole of the cushion—as for me, I should ride on a Finnish pony, and, if I could not get one, then I should ride a Finnish cow, if necessary, but that drive I would not. On mentioning my resolve to A——, that individual smiled feebly and observed that the roads *were* rather bad.

"The *what?*" I said.

"The roads."

"Oh!" I said, "*were* there any?"

A—— affected not to observe my biting irony, and proceeded to explain that he, too, had thought of riding. We would each take a pony, he said, and let the driver bring on the game and guns and dogs, with the tarantass and the third horse.

So we rode home on those Finnish steeds, whose backs were knife-boards. Over our sufferings during that ride, I prefer to draw a curtain. "Cum subit illius tristissima noctis imago," I am forced to the conviction that Mazeppa's little affair was a luxurious journey compared with my dreadful experience on the back of that terrible little animal, who was nothing particular but bone, and whose trotting action has formed the *Leit Motif* for all my nightmares ever since!

IX

A WEEK AMONG THE SNOW-TRACKS—I

It was in the halcyon days while Ostermanch was in the hands of the English, and the popping of English cartridges was still to be heard upon her broad, generous moorlands: before death and change came to haul the British flag from its place, and to substitute for the keen sportsman-like Briton the much-becostumed but lazy Russian with no chivalrous feelings buttoned up within his green embroidered coat, and who will murder a half-fledged cheeping, chicken-grousling as readily as a full-grown bird—ay! and shoot it sitting too, without a pang of remorse: for alas! Ostermanch is now a Russian club, open, indeed, to English members if they care to join, but no longer exclusively English. The old keepers have been turned away, and inferior men are in their places: the old fellows—Matvei, Lákoo, Yegor, were too good for the Russian sportsmen: too keen; they made the Russians walk for their game (a thing

Muscovite sportsmen cannot bear), and discouraged sitting shots and the murder of infant black-game. The new men are probably reclaimed poachers, or rather partly reclaimed poachers; men who trap and steal the game on weekdays and blossom out as keepers on Sundays, when the "sportsmen" come down from town and are shown as much game as the keeper considers good for them.

If birds could speak they would, I am sure, send a deputation to dear old A——, once the head, the honoured head, of the Ostermanch shoot! a deputation to beg him and his English friends to establish themselves once again in the old place, and give them (the birds) a fair chance. "Those were good old times," I think I hear the old blackcock spokesman say; "for though you were shockingly down upon us when you got a chance, yet you always allowed us to fly for our lives, and never shot our little ones as they crept out of the egg. Why, look at my missus here (indicating a weeping grey-hen at his side), her whole family of little ones—nine of them—were killed off before they were a month old! A fat human shot six of them before they could flutter out of his reach, and his dog caught three,—oh! it was shameful; I was not by at the time myself, (the old rip!

of course he wasn't!) but the facts were exactly as I have stated, and this lady will corroborate my story. (Here Mrs. Greyhen curtsies.) So you understand, my lord, we do not approve of the existing régime (this was a foreign blackcock, and had been shot at and missed by a Frenchman), and would prefer your lordship's people about us. You see, we knew well enough who was after us in your lordship's day, and we used to rise as far away from the guns as we could; but now—why, bless you! we don't trouble to get up at all unless they kick us up by stumbling over us; the danger is, that they sometimes see us on the ground; there's no danger if we fly!"

Ah! well,—Ostermanch is gone from us—old Matvei is dead—dead, luckily, before his beloved English *barins* deserted him—and the glory of the grand old place is departed. But this, as I began by saying, was in the halcyon days when English cartridges might still be heard popping upon the moors. Moreover, it was in the month of February—a time of year when the woods are more beautiful than any who have not witnessed it could believe; a time of brilliant sunshine and unabated frost; of fairylike rime embroidery; of dazzling snow, lying firm and slippery as a sheet of

ice over the whole land; a time of white willow-grouse and white hares: a time when snow-shoeing is a sweet dream, and the air is exhilarating and intoxicating and health-giving. It was, in fact, in pursuit of health that I was persuaded to go to Ostermanch one brilliant February, all alone—with instructions to wander about the woods for a week and shoot what I could find. If elk or wolf or lynx should be about, I was to send a keeper to St. Petersburg with the news, when A—— and others would come down and a battue could be arranged. Meanwhile, I was to prowl about forest and moor, practising my snowshoeing and inhaling the champagne-like air in the hopes of shaking off the effects of a serious attack of illness which had lately prostrated me. I may say at once that the treatment was entirely successful, and that in those beautiful wintry solitudes I found all that I sought, and far more than renewed health. To begin at the beginning, before leaving St. Petersburg I was well provided with the necessaries of life—for, excepting black bread and Finnish butter, nothing could be got at Ostermanch. As for cartridges, I had quantities of every sort and size—bullets in case of elk and bear, slugs for wolf and lynx, ones for capercailzie, fours for black game, hares, willow-

grouse, and sundry trivialities such as riabchiks (tree partridges).

I have written elsewhere of the horrors of the road from St. Petersburg to Ostermanch during spring. These horrors are modified during the summer, but even then they are such as to shock the susceptible into mixed feelings with regard to the joys of Ostermanch; but in winter the horror is turned to delight; wheels give place to sledge-runners; the horrible road—reminding one of a rough sea suddenly petrified into dust and stones—has become a level sledge-track; and the misery of the journey is changed to a delight which is all too short, in spite of its thirty-five long miles. The sledge is a village one, without seats: it stands but a foot or so from the ground, and the bottom is filled with hay, a sack of the same being placed in the back part by way of pillow. The traveller or travellers, for there is room for two, lie at full length in the vehicle, as upon a soft couch, while the driver perches as best he can upon the side, resting his feet upon the runners. The sledge is drawn by one or two horses, as required, and the motion is simply delightful. Well protected from the frost by valinki (felt boots), a huge bearskin shuba, and rugs, I lay in my sledge-

divan in a condition of Elysian bliss, and listened to the bells as they tinkled in time with the quick trot of the shaft-horse. The "pristyashka," the assistant horse, harnessed *en liberté* at one side of the shafter, cantered most of the way, putting his companion the trotter upon his mettle to keep pace without breaking. That drive through forest, moor, and villages was very delightful. Old Vladimir, the driver, enjoyed the reputation of being the best of whips, and fully bore out his good character. I found him, besides, a most entertaining companion; for he gave me all sorts of information as to the village life of the moujiks. He himself had worked for some time in St. Petersburg as a "Cruishnik," or grain porter, at the immense wharves of the capital, leaving his share of the communal land to be tilled for the general good of the family by his father and brothers and their wives. We discussed that skeleton in the Russian cupboard, the almost universal over-indulgence of the moujiks in their beloved beverage, vodka, and on this subject Vladimir waxed really eloquent. He was not much of a drinker himself, he said, although not absolutely an abstainer, and he was very well aware of the terrible evil wrought by vodka among its devotees in rural Russia. Poor old Vladimir! his

sentiments did him the greatest credit; but why, oh! why was he drunk all the week while waiting at Ostermanch in order to drive me back at the end of it? Ah! well, like the sporting parson (immortalised by John Leech) who was deposited by his horse, one fine Monday morning, in the ditch, Vladimir would not be wanted for a week, so it did not much matter.

Matvei, Lákoo, and Yegor were all awaiting my arrival at the lodge—any elk? or wolves? No elk; but a family of wolves were on the prowl in the vicinity, and the tracks of a lynx had been seen by Lákoo. So a plan of campaign was forthwith drawn up over the supper-table, the three Finn keepers standing in a row at the foot of the board while I discussed the cold sirloin with a zest for which the keen air and the long drive were responsible. The three grave men would consult a while in their own language, with much argument and scratching of their yellow heads, giving me, occasionally, the benefit of the conclusions arrived at, in very broken Russian. It was decided that Matvei should look out for elk, Yegor keep an eye on the wolves, and Lákoo follow—at a discreet distance—the lynx. If it showed signs of stopping to feed, he was to come

and report progress. Meanwhile a messenger should be sent to A—— informing him that wolves were about; perhaps the news might induce him to come down—a contingency devoutly desired by the keepers, in whose eyes A—— is little short of a deity. I was to spend the day alone, prowling the woods on snow-shoes. If required, I was easily tracked and brought back.

So, after a glass of whisky round—all three men taking the stuff neat and gasping violently after it, for whisky is very much stronger than their accustomed vodka—the three sportsmanlike Finns departed, and I was left to seek the repose which came as soon as sought, thanks again to the beneficent effect of the crisp and exhilarating February air. The lodge at Ostermanch, though a tumble-down wooden structure as seen from outside, was extremely comfortable within, and furnished *à l'Anglais* with good beds and baths and arm-chairs. Another feature of the place was that certain creatures of a depredatory and man-eating nature (not the athletic ones), so common in most Russian shooting lodges, were here absent, or nearly so. I remember one lodge where the creatures were very numerous, very artful, and very, very keen sportsmen. They

had reduced the persecution of mankind to a fine art. It was useless to remove the bed far away from the wall and to place the four legs in four vessels of water. They still knew a trick by which these human wiles might be circumvented. Led by a sage member of the community, perhaps the inventor and patentee of the idea,—they would creep up the wall and out on to the ceiling. Then, after a good look down and a careful aim, they would drop, with unerring precision, upon the unsuspecting slumberer below. The rest may be imagined. As for me, I slept in perfect peace and only awoke to find that another brilliant February day was well advanced, and that it was full time to be up and about. The sun was doing its very best to purvey a little warmth into the poor old earth, so hardly used for many a long month, but met with no success whatever; as an illuminator, however, it was making a great hit. In haste I swallowed my breakfast, and in haste I donned my snowshoes: these were of the long wooden type, without the reindeer-fur beneath, narrow and very fast. I had already learned the art of travelling across country, but not that of running along a sledge-track, which can be done, with the help of an iron-tipped staff, at a terrific pace; so fast,

indeed, that it is easy to keep up with a horse trotting its best. So away I sped, gun in hand, over the communal pasture land, where the double-snipe loves to spend a fortnight in September, and into the moorland and forest beyond, drinking in the delicious air and flying along over the slippery snow, which would have been an extremely difficult matter if I had not, fortunately, happened upon a sledge-track and kept to that. The scene was one that must be witnessed to be appreciated. On all sides was a veritable fairyland of sun and snow and rime-effects upon the delicate tracery of the pine-trees. Each needle of each pine looked as though some master jeweller had specially decorated it with the most beautiful filigree-work which his art could produce, and sparkled and glittered as if covered with multitudes of tiny gems. The snowy surface of the earth was so dazzling in the rays of the brilliant sun that I found it, after a while, exceedingly painful to the eyes, and I was obliged to improvise a shade for them, for fear of evil effects. I saw in the distance blackcock innumerable perched upon the tops of the highest trees, getting through the long dull winter-time in the best way they could, and longing for the *tok* with its excitements, and the

delightful summer season of luscious ripe bilberries and delicious bitter *brousnika*.

There were tracks in the snow—tracks of all sorts and shapes. To mention the largest first: I found the huge hoof-marks of a family of elk—two large and one small track (probably a bull, cow, and calf); but these were old and afforded no hope of sport, though they gave me a thrill of excitement, as I pictured to myself how glorious it would have been to hide behind yonder old stump and see them striding along in their majesty: the old bull leading the way, with his splendid antlered head thrown back upon his shoulders and his big body pounding along through the deep snow, as though that were no exertion whatever! Where were they now? Perhaps hundreds of miles away, for there had been no fall of snow for a fortnight, and these tracks might consequently date from a couple of weeks ago. Then there were hare-tracks innumerable, crossing and recrossing one another with their unmistakable triangles, and occasionally accompanied by the single straight track of a fox, telling a sad tale of how Mr. Reynard went forth in search of a meal; and of pursuit, and despair, and capture, and—breakfast for one.

I saw no tracks of wolves, excepting one very old one, and none at all of either bear or lynx—the bears being at this season of the year busily employed taking their annual siesta. I may mention, as a curious circumstance, that the lynx, which is of course a very much smaller animal than the bear, manages to leave a footprint in the snow almost as large as that made by the last-named creature, his paws being exceedingly big and powerful in comparison with his size. I was perfectly happy prowling about moor and forest, and watching the tracks of the various animals which had lately wandered over the ground I trod. I got but little shooting all day, though I had great fun with some willow-grouse upon which I stumbled. These birds were perfectly white now (they are most beautiful during the transition period of mixed browns and white)—and they rose from a few yards in front of me like five little flying ghosts. It was most difficult to see them against the snow, and I believe the birds relied upon this circumstance, for they permitted me, over and over again, to approach close up to them probably thinking that I should never find them in the snow, but losing heart as I came nearer. I managed to shoot a brace of the little white beauties, and might perhaps have accounted for the whole

family—had I been "so disposed;" but I was not anxious to carry weight in my snowshoe running. I saw several hares—quite white, but for the same reason refrained from firing at them. Practising hard for the whole of this first day of my week at Ostermanch, I attained considerable proficiency in running along a sledge-track, successfully racing, in one instance, a trotting horse driven by a Finn peasant who came up from behind, and—anxious to see who this insane, flying *barin* could be—quickened up in order to catch me, but failed to do so in a run of four or five miles. I felt very proud of my achievement, though the effort reduced me for some minutes to a helpless mass of puffing humanity. There was but little incident during my wanderings, but I must mention one slight *contretemps*, which I thought at first was destined to bring to an abrupt termination the career of the individual who now records it. I had found a most fascinating hill, fascinating from the point of view of the snow-shoer. It was long—and not too steep. At the bottom was the river (frozen over, of course), some ten yards in width. I should have to turn sharp round at right angles, and run along the level surface of the ice, in order to avoid darting up the opposite bank and slipping down again backwards.

I shot the hill very successfully, reaching the river with a terrific impetus; but I could not turn to the left quickly enough, and was consequently carried with irresistible force straight up the bank opposite. The impetus took me several feet up the steep incline, but when at last my shoes abruptly ceased to move, I fell backwards, and being then on a steep slope my head rested very much lower than my feet, and as these were in snowshoes, I was utterly helpless and quite unable to recover the perpendicular. When I realised this fact the discovery sent a chill through my veins. What in the world should I do? Must I really lie here and starve? I should certainly freeze to death long before the keepers could track and release me! For many minutes my frantic exertions were unavailing, and I was seriously losing heart when fortunately the instep-strap of one of my shoes gave way, and having got one shoe off, I succeeded in freeing myself, after further violent struggles, of the second. But this was a lesson to me, and I have since that day been very careful how I shoot hills with narrow rivers at their foot.

When I returned home, after one of the most delightful days I had ever spent, though my bag consisted but of a brace of willow-grouse (which

proved, by the way, very much more succulent than are the poor frozen creatures offered for sale in this country during the winter season), I found that Yegor had pleasant news for me. The wolf family, of which mention has already been made, were still in the neighbourhood, and the old paterfamilias seemed to be prowling about on his own account, leaving the mother and her brats to forage for themselves.

Would I try the squeaking-pig plan?

Yes, by all means I would try what the squeaking pig could do for us. Yegor had at home, he said, a young porker whose lungs could be depended upon. He would drive at once to his village and fetch him, calling for me at about nine, after I had discussed my dinner.

Capital! nothing could be more delightful—and to make things still more pleasant, just as I was sitting down to dinner up drove A—— amid the merry tinkling of sledge-bells and the usual shouts of the driver. He had received the message as to the presence of wolves and a possible lynx, and had decided to join me for a day or two. Though A—— had had about as much driving as he felt inclined for, he could not resist the temptation of

a night sledge-excursion through the forest, to the music of the vocal pigling. When therefore Yegor appeared shortly after dinner, the pig already hard at work loudly protesting against things in general, we both got into his sledge, lit our smokables, settled ourselves at full-length on the hay cushions, and abandoned ourselves to the full enjoyment of the brilliant night, the delightful motion, and—the music. That pig was a marvel. Most pigs, when taken out wolf shooting, require a little pressure to keep them up to the standard of noise required; the pressure being usually applied to the caudal appendage; but this animal of Yegor's seemed to understand what was expected of it, and scarcely ceased for a single instant to give vent to its feelings of—I don't know what: delight, perhaps: it may have enjoyed the drive for all I know to the contrary—*we* did, anyhow—indeed, I don't think I shall ever forget the beautiful scene through which we glided that evening! There was not a breath of wind, but the frost was intense. The tall pines on each side of the track were by moonlight almost more beautiful, in a chaste way, than in the brilliant glare of the sunshine. There was not one bough nor one twig of any one tree that was not exquisitely

traced by the rime and silvered by the kiss of the moonbeams. Gigantic shadows lay across the sledge track, and caused our little steed to prick up his ears and sniff at the possible dangers in his path. . . . We glided along almost silently (always excepting the frantic squealing of that plucky porker). A—— is nothing of a poet, and preferred to close his eyes in slumber rather than employ them in admiring the beauties which I have endeavoured to describe; but he did occasionally converse for a few minutes, whenever the pig, by an extraordinary effort, managed to arouse him. All conversation had to be conducted, however, in a whisper; for in case there should be wolves about, and these should be attracted by the vocal efforts of our porcine accomplice, they must not be frightened away again by the sound of human voices. I remember A—— and I were engaged upon a sleepy discussion of some topic entirely unconnected with the subject of wolves—indeed, I had completely forgotten for the moment the object of our midnight drive—when suddenly A——, to my intense surprise, started from his recumbent attitude at the bottom of the sledge, seized his gun and discharged it in the direction of the pine-trees on the left of the track; as he did so, he lost his balance

and performed a neat exit from the sledge into the snow. At the same instant the little horse, startled by the report, kicked up behind and shied violently. Over went the sledge, Yegor, the pig, and myself: Yegor with great presence of mind seizing the pig by the leg in mid-air as we all flew together through space. During my flight I just caught one glimpse of a gaunt grey creature disappearing among the pines in the opposite direction.

"Didn't you see them? why didn't you fire?" gasped A——, emerging from the depths of his snow bath. I explained that I was otherwise engaged at the moment when I caught a fleeting glimpse of the wolf: namely, in chasing my gun, Yegor, and the pig, through ether.

"There were three, my dear chap," said A—— excitedly. "What a pity you didn't get your gun off! I may have hit one—we must go back on their tracks and see."

Sure enough, he had hit one: there was quite a quantity of blood upon the track. Leaving Yegor and the pig to look after the horse (which, after shooting us all out into the snow, had made the *amende honorable* by remaining where it was instead of running away and leaving us to our fate, as a steed

of inferior principles might have done), A—— and I floundered through the snow as quickly as, without snowshoes, was practicable in the direction taken by the wounded animal. Having pounded along for upwards of half a mile, and being reduced by heat and breathlessness to a truly deplorable condition—for there is nothing so fatiguing as attempting to make rapid way through deep snow without the shoes—we were just upon abandoning the pursuit until such time as we could return properly equipped, when we were startled by a loud snarl within a couple of yards of us, and proceeding, apparently, from the roots of a large pine in front of us. There he was—half lying and half standing, trying his best to raise once more his poor slug-riddled body, and hurl himself with a last effort upon us, the destroyers of his peace. What a look of hate he gave us! he seemed a terrible beast in the moonlight, and I thought it rather brave of A—— to go close up to his ear and give him the *coup-de-grâce* with a bullet from the revolver. He gave a shiver and fell over, and in one moment his savage wolf-soul had fled to the happy hunting grounds where wolves and "such-like" receive, I hope, their compensations; only what always puzzles me about those same hunting

grounds, yclept "happy," is, that if there is to be any hunting, somebody, clearly, must be hunted; and then the question arises, who? It must be some animal that thoroughly enjoys being hunted, like the fox.

A—— said that this was a great piece of luck for us (he did not explain where my share of the luck came in; probably it lay in the fact that I had enjoyed a delightful flight through the air, and that every pocket I possessed was crammed full of cold snow!), because the method of hunting wolves by the aid of a squealing pig is very rarely successful, for several good reasons. Firstly, the wolf must be within ear-shot of the pig's voice. Secondly, he must be very hungry before he will venture close enough to the sledge to afford a shot. Thirdly, even though he be close enough to afford a shot, the sportsman will, in all probability, be unable to see him in consequence of the density of the cover.

A—— was immensely elated with the success of our expedition and of his snap shot, and justly so. We lavished upon that talented pig all the expressions of regard and endearment which our knowledge of his native language could command: nay, we did

more—on arrival at the lodge we treated him to the very best meal he had ever eaten in his life; he consumed it, with many grunts of satisfaction, in the keepers' room and in Yegor's company.

A—— was anxious to purchase that pig, as a further sign of regard; but, as I pointed out, the only thing he could do with it would be to eat it, and that would be a way of showing his regard and gratitude which, I said, the pig might not altogether appreciate. So our friend returned whence he came, and doubtless still tells the tale how, one cold night, he sallied forth with a couple of English barins and slew a mighty wolf.

Lákoo, we learned, was still busy with his lynx. He had left word that he hoped to ring the animal next day. This was delightful news, and we retired to our rooms full of hope for the morrow, as well as satisfaction for the day just passed. A—— with his wolf had done better than I with my poor brace of willow-grouse; but then I counted my successes in other directions: I had acquired a new art; I had met with an adventure; and I had seen such sights amid the fairy bowers of the sunny forest as should remain a joy to me for ever. Oh! the sparkle of it all, and the vigour in the air, and the glorious freedom

of the moors, and the sublime witchery of the pine-forest!

Who would not be an elk, or a capercailzie, or even a hare (if only Brer Fox were not about), or anything that has a vested interest in the grand, free, careless life of the forest?

X

A WEEK AMONG THE SNOW-TRACKS—II

LÁKOO entered the room next morning, as A—— and I sat at breakfast; and it was evident, from the broad grin upon his usually sedate countenance, that he had pleasant news for us. He had got the lynx, he assured us, using the Russian equivalent, "on toast." He had followed it, at a discreet distance, all day, and towards evening, finding that it had killed a hare, left it alone, for he knew that the animal would not budge after a good gorge. Early this morning he had ringed it.

This information put the possibility of further breakfasting out of the question. Lynxes are rare animals, and the chance of shooting one was not to be missed. Guns were quickly seized, cups of coffee precipitately emptied, snowshoes seen to—and within ten minutes we were seated in the sledge, and travelling as fast as the little Finn pony could move towards the "ring." Lákoo had a dozen trusty

beaters already placed, he told us, and the ring was three or four miles away. The morning was no whit less bright than its predecessor, nor was the air less exhilarating—everything around and below and above us was beautiful; we could not but share in the exuberance of the moment, and our spirits were quite on a par with the general gladness.

The lynx is a horribly cunning creature, as any who have hunted him are aware. It is the custom, in parts of the country, to pursue him on snowshoes, sometimes with the assistance of dogs, sometimes without. A first-class runner will run down a lynx in this way, chasing him mercilessly, as a stoat does a rabbit, until the quarry is exhausted, and can go no further. But the lynx has been known to play his pursuers a nasty trick. When he finds that he can no longer hope to escape by flight, and that his pursuers are gaining upon him, he suddenly runs up the first tree that lies in the direct path, and crouching along a branch, ready for a spring, awaits the approach of his enemy. When the latter comes within striking distance, or perhaps when, not dreaming that his quarry has taken refuge in the tree, he rushes past it—still, as he thinks, upon the track—the cunning lynx makes its spring straight at the neck or

throat of its victim, sometimes actually tearing the life out of him, but always terribly mauling him with its powerful claws and teeth. It is therefore necessary to hunt the lynx with at least one eye wide open, for if there is a creature on the face of the earth which possesses the capacity of baffling humankind more than another, that creature is undoubtedly the lynx.

Now in the present instance, we felt pretty sure of our lynx. He had supped generously the evening before, and was known to be fast asleep, or at all events lying quiescent, within the circumference of a small circle around which kept watch and ward twelve silent, well-trained beaters. These men knew better than to make the slightest sound or movement which could betray their presence. Vain hope!—we made the beat, placing ourselves with the greatest possible care behind tree-trunks, and wearing long white calico over-alls, like gigantic night-shirts, in order that we might be as invisible as possible against the white of the snow. The keepers and beaters did their part well; there was nothing done or left undone, which was not in strict accordance with the rules of precaution, and yet—when the line of beaters closed in, and approached the corner in which A——

and I were anxiously awaiting our prey, there had as yet been no sign of the lynx. Lákoo—much crestfallen—declared that, after placing us, he had walked round the circle in order to make sure that the animal was still within, and that undoubtedly it had not, up to then, made its exit. Where, then, was it now?

A hurried walk round the ring revealed the fact that our wide-awake friend had crept out between two beaters, neither of them being aware of his proximity. This was very annoying and disappointing. However, he had not been seriously alarmed, and there was a fair chance that Lákoo, with his swift shoes, might be able to ring him again. So Lákoo, after venting his feelings in the choicest Finnish upon the two beaters who had allowed the lynx to escape unseen, and who evinced a mastery of Finnish Billingsgate no whit inferior to that of Lákoo himself—who got quite as much as he gave—disappeared into the forest, while the beaters remained where they were, smoking their long pipes and chatting contentedly in the sedate and solemn manner of their tribe. As for A—— and me, we amused ourselves by strolling about upon our snowshoes, enjoying the air, and wondering what, in the name of all that was

mysterious, the hares meant by meandering about in the bewildering manner indicated by their tracks. Not one of them seemed to have a settled purpose in his wanderings, but went round and round and in and out, as though he were dodging a policeman, or as if he had mistaken the month of February for March, during which season, as every one knows, Brer Hare is apt to be a little eccentric, and his friends, in speaking of him, look wise, and tap their forehead. So we strolled and chatted, and watched two little field-mice running about aimlessly over the hard surface of the snow, and we were getting hungry and tired of waiting, when to us, yawning and complaining, suddenly appeared Lákoo. He was hot and breathless, but triumphant and happy; the lynx was successfully ringed once more, and scarcely two miles away. This was certainly an unexpected stroke of luck, and we hastened off in company with Lákoo and the beaters to see whether the cunning old lynx was to outwit us again, or we him.

"We shall get him all right," said A——, "if those fools of beaters keep their eyes open;—of course, if they are such idiots as to let him run through their legs again, we can't stop him!"

I remembered these words of A——'s, after-

wards, but was too noble to remind him of them!

This time the beaters were warned that if the lynx was allowed to escape between any two of them, they should get no vodka, and the actual culprits should not be employed again for a year. Then we made the beat. A—— and I felt sure of the lynx, and we could tell by the excited shouts of the beaters that he had been seen, and had not, at all events, escaped through the ring. The wood was rather dense, but we were both placed at the further side of a cutting, so that we might have the benefit of a clear shot while he crossed the three or four yards of open.

But lo! the beaters came through and reached the cutting, and the beat was at an end; and their faces were blank, and the countenance of Lákoo wore an expression of chastened sorrow, mingled with bewilderment: for there was no lynx to be seen.

"Why did not your Mercifulness fire?" asked Lákoo of A——, and his voice was as the voice of a father who rebukes his child.

A—— protested that there had been nothing to fire at, excepting a brace of capercailzies and a few hares—he wasn't going to fire at them, of course.

"But the lynx," said Lákoo, "did he not come out

near your Mercifulness? I drove him straight towards your Mercifulness's position, and he did not turn back!"

Here an exclamation from a beater caused us all to turn. He was examining a track in the cover five yards to the left of A——'s place—not an inch more. It was a lynx-track. On the other side of the cutting was a corresponding footprint. There was no doubt about the matter, the animal had jumped over the road, almost brushing A——'s left arm as he did so, and A—— had not seen him! Probably the cunning brute had crept up to the edge of the wood; caught sight of A——; waited until the latter was looking the other way, and then quietly leaped the cutting, taking it at a standing jump, and made off in safety into the dense cover on the other side.

Poor dear old A——! he did not say a word then; but I saw him afterwards tip the beater whom he had abused; he did it on the sly, and thought no one saw him, but I spotted the action, and I have no doubt the recording angel did so too. Then we started homewards, having given up all thought of killing this prince of deceivers, who, A—— said, must certainly have been in league with the powers of deception and darkness. Poor A—— could

not forgive himself, neither could he talk of anything else. How was it possible, he wished to know, that a man whose senses were all on the alert, and particularly on the alert, should neither see nor hear a creature pass within a few yards of him? There must have been some sound, he argued, even a lynx could not move about without making a soft footfall, and yet he had heard nothing—absolutely nothing! I was quite as incompetent to explain the mystery as A—— himself; but my opinion of the animal and his proverbial cunning rose to heights whose summits were lost in the mists of wonder and admiration. But, strange as it may appear, we had not even now quite finished with that lynx. Whether he had formed conclusions unflattering to our sagacity, deciding that we were not a dangerous type of sportsman, or whether he was so attached to the place that he could not make up his mind to leave it, I know not; but this I know, that as A—— and I sat at our late lunch—it was now about three o'clock—still discussing the artful creature who had so neatly outwitted us, Lákoo rushed in to say that he had ringed him a third time. A—— was still sore, and declared that he would not stir another step after the brute; but I was anxious to go, and

poor Lákoo looked so miserable at the very idea of abandoning his smartly effected ring, that A—— good-naturedly consented to come too. So the Irish stew was sent back to the kitchen to be kept hot, the guns were taken in hand once more, and away we went. I was absolutely determined that if that lynx came within striking distance of me, he should perish; yea, though he conveyed himself with the artfulness and secrecy of Beelzebub, the prince of deceivers and lynxes. Thus resolved, I stood behind my tree-trunk, with all my senses strung to such a pitch of acuteness that I believe I should have heard a dead leaf rustle half a mile away.

I did hear something after a while. The beaters had not as yet commenced to give vent to those sounds by means of which they are in the habit, on these occasions, of changing the peaceful forest into a pandemonium; but I thought I heard a stealthy, soft, padded footstep coming towards and across me. I made up my mind that if this should prove to be the lynx, and he should cross the open on my left (the footsteps seemed to tend in that direction), I must have my gun ready pointed, and pull the trigger the instant I caught the first glimpse of a moving thing. I could see nothing within the wood itself,

the cover was far too dense. Yes, there certainly were footsteps of some sort approaching the cutting; it might prove to be nothing but a hare or a fox, well, I should fire in any case and take my chance. . . . A minute — two minutes of intensest excitement. What a hideous noise my heart was making! How cautiously the beast, whatever he is, is moving. My gun is all right, shaky rather, but pointing right. He is close to that spot now—it's rather far, nearly forty yards, and slugs scatter so dreadfully! . . . Hullo! . . . Bang! The old villain was caught at last! Never gun killed cleaner than did my trusty weapon on this occasion. The charge, a wonderfully large proportion of it, considering that it consisted of slugs, entered his neck and the side of his head, and he never waved another whisker. There he lay, with his paintbrush-tipped ears cocked as though still on the look-out for possible dangers; they had played him false for once, those trusty ears of his, and those cunning eyes, which had never failed him up till now in detecting a danger in the path, they were closing in death. His fur was of the lightest mottled brown; his legs were very long in comparison with the size of his body, which was about the length of that of a collie dog, and gave evidence of enormous power and activity; as for his

feet and claws, they were truly terrible to look upon, and made one shudder to think of the fate of any unfortunate victim to his cunning, human or otherwise. To do A—— justice, he was as elated as I was over this happy conclusion to a day of disappointments. I fear the best interests of Temperance were not promoted by our conduct towards the beaters, for we treated them, in the exuberance of our spirits, to a whole vedro of vodka, sufficient for three times their number; yet they left never a drop in the measure. Russians are terribly hard drinkers; they prefer vodka because they are used to it, but nothing comes amiss to them. I recollect one terribly cold night I was dining with friends in St. Petersburg, the dinner to be followed by a visit to the theatre. An isvoschick (hired) carriage was in waiting to take the party to the play, and in consideration of the extreme severity of the weather, the host kindly gave orders that a large glassful of sherry should be taken to the presumably half-frozen driver. But, to our surprise, the servant returned with the wine untouched. The isvoschick refused to drink it, he explained: he said it was no use to him: he liked something stronger if he drank at all! "Very well," said our hospitable host, "give him some brandy instead." After a few moments the

servant reappeared with an empty tumbler. "Well, was that strong enough for him?" we inquired.

The man informed us, with the utmost composure, that he had not wasted brandy upon the driver, because he knew what he would like much better: he had actually given the wretched isvoschick three parts of a tumblerful of spirits of wine. I was relieved to find that the man was no whit the worse for the dose; indeed, he expressed himself as delighted with the quality of the "wine" of which he had partaken; he said it was just the stuff for a cold night.

How delicious that Irish stew tasted. Excitement and the cold air had made us ravenous. It was five o'clock, and we had taken no lunch into the woods, never dreaming but that we should either kill our quarry in the first beat, or bid farewell of him for ever. Who could suppose that a lynx would suffer himself to be ringed a second, and even, as it turned out, a third time? That was the fatal mistake of our friend; he despised his enemies; he did not consider us, after our first blunder, worth either eluding or deluding; we might ring him over and over again, he thought, if it amused us, he could always humbug us easily enough at the last moment. Then there overtook him that fate which so frequently overtakes those

who underrate the strength of their enemies—he was cut off in the midst of his pride and of his boasting.

I can still feast my eyes upon that lynx, and do so every day; for he was most beautifully stuffed and set up at the Academy of Arts at St. Petersburg. He is represented "as he appeared," awaiting some enemy or victim, crouched along the bough of a tree all ready for his deadly spring. He has frightened many a child, and startled many a grown person, who has chanced to look up suddenly and beheld his terrific expression as he stands, apparently, in the very act of springing down into the room! Lynxes are by no means common in Russia, indeed, I never saw another, and rarely heard of one being ringed at any of the shooting clubs which I had the privilege of visiting. But a friend who lives in one of the suburbs of St. Petersburg informed me of a very curious circumstance in connection with one of these animals. This gentleman possessed a field in which he occasionally practised his archery. This field was practically within the actual limits of the city, and was separated from the adjoining property by a stone wall of some eight feet in height. One day, when my friend with his family were gathered at the targets, they distinctly saw a fine lynx jump over the wall and stand watching the group of ladies

and gentlemen. No sooner was his identity established, however, than he received the flattering but embarrassing attention of a flight of arrows aimed at his person. None hit him ; but his feelings naturally resented the inhospitable action ; he cantered a few yards down the wall, and then, with matchless grace and agility, bounded back again to the other side. What became of him, or whence he came, or why, history revealeth not ; but I believe the facts to be exactly as I have now related them. A certain Russian keeper, with whom I was out once or twice while in the country, was pre-eminently gifted in the art of imitating the calls of all kinds of birds and animals. I remember one night we were sitting together in the forest waiting, over a fire, for the moment when the capercailzies should begin their morning challenges and allow us to commence our stalking operations—and I suggested that he should fill out a little time by giving me an example of his reputed skill. As all the denizens of the woods, feathered and otherwise, are presumably familiar with each other's cries, I did not consider that there would be any danger of frightening away the capercailzies. So old Simeon began by imitating the call of a lynx : and a rare caterwauling he made!

"Did lynxes really make such a terrible noise as that?" I asked.

Before Simeon had time or breath (after his exertions) to reply, the answer came very conclusively in a singular and exciting manner. Almost before the sound of his caterwauling had died into silence, it was repeated from far away, so exactly that I imagined that it was the echo. But no, it continued too long for that. By all that was exciting and delightful, Simeon's calls had reached the ear of a real live lynx, and were being responded to! Simeon's excitement quite equalled my own.

"Have you any slug cartridges?" he whispered. Yes, I had, and with fingers trembling with excitement I drew out those prepared for capercailzies, and replaced them with slugs.

Simeon was now hard at work again, caterwauling as though his very existence depended upon the amount of discordant noise he could produce; and each time that the call was responded to, the reply was nearer than the last. This went on until the real lynx had approached so close to us that my head was all of a whirl with the intense excitement of the moment; he could not be more than a hundred yards distant from us—we had taken the precaution to move

away from the fire lest the light should alarm him,—but alas! having come so far he would come no further.

Either there was something about Simeon's accent which I could not detect, but which Brer Lynx did, and which convinced him that Lynx Simeon was not a desirable acquaintance; or, perhaps (and this idea brought my excitement to an almost unbearable point), perhaps the visitor had actually come—or even might at this very moment be present—within a few yards of us, watching us and thinking what a fool he had nearly made of himself, and what would be the effect of a nicely-aimed spring at the young one's throat (meaning me). However this may have been, he answered the calls no more—he had found us out! and as there was no snow, we were unable to discover how closely he had actually approached us, or what may have been his subsequent action. It was a near thing, and Simeon's caterwauling was simply a masterpiece of imitation! So far as the human ear was capable of judging, there was no difference whatever between his calls and the "real article;" but it is probable that he spoke with a cockney, or perhaps with a foreign feline accent; or possibly he dropped his h's, in the lynxine equivalent, and thus gave himself

away when success was, as it were, dropping, like a ripe fruit, into his very mouth. Enough! it was fate. But, as I said before, it was a near thing.

Simeon was equally clever in imitating the howling of wolves: but though I have heard him call these, and receive replies, the wolves did not come any nearer. I wonder what the wolves shouted back to Simeon? His calls always meant, I imagine, "Come over here —there's some grand fun on down my way!" and the lynx, doubtless because these animals are scarce, and because he was dull without companions, replied, "All right--I'm coming! leave a little for me!"

But the wolves—what did they say? I thought at the time, and the idea amused me, that probably they were shouting back something to this effect: "What is it? bar larks, you know! Can't you bring it over here?" and that when Simeon repeated, as he did, his former invitation, they said: "Well, we are not coming all that way, unless you tell us what you've got! we've caught an old village dog over here and are having a good time—no use your coming—

'One dog among four of us,
Glad there are no more of us.'"

or words to that effect. But I have wandered far from my subject.

We have finished our five o'clock lunch, and A—— is fast asleep in one of the luxurious arm-chairs. I take my pick from the respectable Ostermanch library —there are some nice books, but nobody has ever been known to read one of them; for one thing, the chairs are too comfortable; for another, a man is always tired at Ostermanch. There is so much to do out of doors, that when one returns home and the cravings of nature have been appeased, the function of the books is not to be read, but to be held in the hand until sweet Slumber gently relaxes the fingers, and allows their burden to flutter to the ground, or into the fire. This was ever the fate of the "midnight darlings" of the Ostermanch library, and this was the fate of my book on the evening of the day which saw the triumph of Matter, in the shape of me, over Mind, in the person of the lynx. And there, in our two arm-chairs, A—— and I snored peacefully until nine o'clock struck, and Matvei, Yegor, and Lákoo attended to report progress, and to arrange the plan of campaign for to-morrow.

None of them had any big game ringed, and it was decided that they should all start early next morning in order to scour the woods for elk-tracks. We should snowshoe about the country at our leisure and await

them at mid-day, in case anything should have turned up by that time.

Then we retired to bed, and I fought once again, in my dreams, with giant lynxes, which rained upon me from the trees, and rushed at me from thickets, always to fall beneath my unerring aim, while, side by side with these pictures of my own prowess and triumphs, came the vision of poor A—— looking up in the air while a lynx ran between his legs; and again A—— gazing into the cover at his feet, while a gigantic animal of the lynx family sat and grinned at him and "winked the other eye" from the bough of a pine-tree over his head.

Thus did I triumph over A—— both by day and by night. He had, on the first evening, come in an easy winner with his wolf; but to-day I had trumped him with my lynx: who would take the odd trick on the third day?

XI

A WEEK AMONG THE SNOW-TRACKS—III

In accordance with the arrangements made over-night, A—— and I were up and about at the comparatively early hour of eight. We had resolved to do a little tracking and perhaps "ringing" on our own account. We would try for a hare or two, or a fox, *faute de mieux*, and we made a little arrangement before separating, that whichever of us first succeeded in ringing an animal of any sort, should summon the other by whistle; then we should toss up for the position of "gun," the loser to be beater. The beating was to be done on the "Lookatch" principle, a system by which an animal may be driven by two persons, or even by one only, towards a given point. This is done, or rather it is not always done, for the system often fails, though I have known a clever Lookatch occasionally work wonders, by keeping close behind the bewildered animal under treatment—on snowshoes, of course cutting him off if he shows any inclination to steer too

much to either side, and so gradually guiding him, by voice and movement, in the required direction. I have known a couple of Lookatchee to drive foxes and wolves in this manner within five yards of any given point.

Those who have never tried it would not easily believe how difficult it is to keep a straight line through a pathless forest. I remember one day at Niasino, the home of the blackcock, I had spent the night with a keeper, old Solomon, in a shalashka, or hut, made of pine boughs. At the conclusion of the blackcock-tok, or tournament, not feeling inclined to walk all the way back to Solomon's village, where the ponies had been left, I sent the keeper for them, intending myself to take a short cut through the woods to a point where I knew that the road divided the forest. This point, Solomon assured me, was distant at the most three-quarters of a mile; and I was instructed to enter the forest where I then stood, at its skirt, and to walk in a straight line until I reached the road, where he would join me with the horses as quickly as possible. Nothing could be more simple. I started upon my walk without a thought of any possible difficulty—striking, as I imagined, in a bee line for the road. On I went, over drifts of snow furrowed and marked

with the tracks of every sort of creature that runs: the huge holes that told of elk; the neat little footprints of foxes; the track of wolves and of birds of every kind that haunts the woods. Here and there I stumbled through pools of half-frozen water and over patches of dead heather, half asleep, for I had been on the watch all night at the blackcock-tok, until at last I began to think that this was certainly the very longest three-quarters of a mile that I had ever covered! Presently, guessing that I must somehow have gone wrong, I shouted, in the hope of attracting old Solomon's attention, and of ascertaining from his reply my exact position with regard to the road. But answer came there none.

Could I have crossed the road in my sleepy condition without observing that I had done so? Surely not. What was to be done? There was nothing to be done—except to walk straight on, and hope for the best.

So on I went once more, floundering along for at least another mile, shouting every now and again, but receiving no reply. I was getting very hungry, as a man well may after spending a long cold night in a shalashka; but, alas! the prospect of breakfast seemed far, far away.

Surely I was not destined to starve outright? Was

it ordained that I should gaze no more upon the comfortable terrestrial spectacle of a substantial breakfast? Nay! I had a few cartridges; I could at least whistle up a tree partridge, shoot him and eat him raw —raw, bah! On and on and on I went. The forests in Russia are scores of miles in depth: this one, indeed, was bisected by a road, but then I had missed the road, and I might at this moment be pushing on into the depths—farther and farther from all hope of deliverance, and life, and—breakfast.

What with real hunger and the hopeless feeling of being lost, I was beginning to be seriously concerned, when at length I thought I observed that the trees were thinning and the light growing stronger. Yes! by all that was delightful, I was reaching the edge of the wood—the road at last—glory! It was undoubtedly the edge of the wood; but, will the reader believe me? when, like Xenophon's army or Stanley's niggers, I rushed cheering into the open, it was not the road I found. The place seemed strangely familiar . . . where in the world had I got to? . . . Then it dawned upon me: I had come out of the forest in the very place, actually within five yards, of the very spot at which I had entered it! I had described an irregular circle, while firmly under the impression that I was walking

in a straight line. I don't think I have ever, either before or since, felt quite so small as I did at the moment of making this discovery: it was humiliating to the last degree. I remember I went humbly round by the road, after all, and found Solomon wondering what had become of the barin. I did not gratify Solomon's curiosity. I kept the story of my adventure as a sort of penance—to be told to my friends at moments when I felt that a little self-mortification would be salutary. Since the above most lamentable failure, I have been very careful as to trusting myself in the pathless forests without a keeper.

But on this particular morning there was no danger of being lost, for we were about to practise our "ringing" upon a large track of moorland, surrounded, indeed, by forest, but itself covered with only half grown brushwood, varied by occasional clumps of young pines and birches. I could not well lose myself here. It was no difficult matter to find the track of a hare—there were plenty about, and after following one for a short distance I started away to the right of Pussie's footprints, with the intention of describing a circle or "ring," in the hope that the hare would remain in the centre of it, in order to give A—— and me a little innocent recreation

trying to drive her out *à la* Lookatch. I intended my circle to measure about half a mile in diameter, but it refused to be limited to this or any other dimensions. After walking for half-an-hour without returning to the starting-point, I concluded that something must have gone wrong with my steering, and harked back upon my own track. I then found that, though I had begun fairly well, after the first curve my footprints began to tend—not back by another half circle towards the starting-point, but away from it, so that I had described an irregular S. So much for my first ring. The second time I was determined to complete my circle, but so anxious was I to effect this, that I found myself back at the starting-point before I had covered much more than one hundred yards. Convinced that there was far more to learn in the art of ringing than I had previously supposed, I was about to make a third attempt, when at that moment I heard A——'s shrill whistle summoning me. A—— thought he had ringed a hare, and generously offered to act as beater while I assumed the post of honour, gun in hand, in order to engage and overthrow the quarry—if it ever arrived.

I waited a very long time for A—— and that hare. A—— had started beating about a couple of

hundred yards away: but after a while the sound of his voice and his hand-clapping seemed to be going further and further from me instead of approaching nearer, until at last I was forced to the conclusion that A—— was not very much better at this game than I was, and that he, too, had missed his line. So I followed him and found that the hare had come out of the ring, and was likewise pursuing A——, not, I imagine, with any sinister intention of doing the poor fellow an injury, but merely because it was anxious to discover what he was shouting and clapping his hands about. I did not see the hare; but I could tell by her tracks that she was pursuing A——. Luckily A—— did not look round, for it would have been a terrible shock to his feelings to see the hare, which he fondly imagined he was driving towards me, following close at his heels, with myself bringing up the rear a couple of hundred yards behind. When I overtook A—— (the hare having discreetly withdrawn at my approach), he was rather put out with me for having left my place during a beat—a most unsportsmanlike thing to do, he said.

I explained that his erratic meanderings did not constitute what I was accustomed to consider a "beat:" I had yet to learn, I said, and A—— winced at the

cutting expression, that the proper way to drive a hare one way was to shout like a lunatic and walk in the opposite direction. It seemed to me, I added, that the hare would be equally demented if, under these circumstances, it feebly ran towards the gun and got itself shot.

A—— said: "Nonsense, my dear fellow, I was only making a wider beat!" Then I pointed out to A—— that the hare had been cantering after him, and, if I had not come to his assistance, that she might have sneaked up from behind and butchered him. This startling revelation of the danger through which he had all unconsciously passed brought A—— (who is not a fool), to his senses, and he frankly acknowledged that this was his first ring, and that perhaps, after all, it *was* as well that I had not stood in my place and waited for him, because, as his tracks showed, it was very uncertain what part of Europe his ring might have taken him to, and he should not like to reflect that he had caused me to stay and perish at my post, like Casabianca.

I said that, if he did not mind, I should prefer to be beater next time, and he should stand in the cold and watch me play hide-and-seek with the hares. It wasn't fair, I explained, that I should have all the fun every time.

We were walking along side by side while the above cutting remarks passed, and I have no doubt there would be other equally incisive speeches to record, but that just at this point in the conversation we were brought up by a sight which sent the blood flying through our veins. It was nothing less than the fresh track of three elk! Any tyro—and I was undoubtedly a tyro—could tell that they were fresh, and the next moment we received conclusive and delightful evidence of the fact. Half a mile away from us, between the brushwood-clothed moor and the dense forest beyond, was a patch of open ground, and as we raised our eyes from the track at our feet, we distinctly saw crossing this open a beautiful bull elk, followed by an equally fine cow and a half-grown calf. They were not hurrying along, but as they swung through the deep snow they helped themselves, now and again, to any bit of youngish pine-growth that happened to take their fancy.

We waited, breathless with admiration and excitement, until they were safely hidden from us in the dark forest; then A—— seized my hand and shook it. "F——," he said, "you have seen a sight which kings might ache to see, and yet never behold: them's elks."

I entreated A——, if it were possible, just for once, to throw off his real nature and be a man of sense. Was there *any* chance of getting Lákoo or somebody to ring them, if we went back at once?

A—— looked at his watch. It was close on twelve o'clock. The keepers were to meet us at the lodge at twelve—what luck! We must hurry back at once and send Lákoo and Yegor—Matvei too, if he was there, on our tracks.

To say that we hastened homewards would be to express very feebly indeed the electric rapidity of our return. We flew over the level ground, and precipitated ourselves down the hills with frenzied speed. All the keepers were waiting for us—they had foxes ringed: one had a wolf. Wolf us no wolves, we panted, but take your snowshoes, all of you, and follow our tracks—there are three elk waiting to be ringed—*three elk*, little fathers, what think you of that?

These good and keen men soon showed us what they thought of it, for the words were hardly out of our mouths before the last of their coat-tails waved us adieu, as it disappeared round the corner of the house, and over the home-fields in the direction that our snowshoe tracks pointed out. A—— and I dared not leave the house that afternoon, lest the keepers

should return with news of an elk-ring, so we stayed at home and practised rifle shooting out of the window, which, with a meal or two and a little reading, gradually wiled away the tedious and anxious day. No one returned before dinner-time. It was now too late to do anything until to-morrow; but when nine o'clock came and still no keepers arrived, we began to be seriously afraid that the elk had got clear away, refusing to be ringed at all. But at ten o'clock old Matvei arrived, very hot, very tired, very draggled,—but radiant. They had ringed the elk twenty miles away, close to Ladoga Lake. Yegor and Lákoo were collecting beaters for a battue to-morrow: all was well.

I hope that Matvei did not suffer from nightmare that night, but if he did not it was not for lack of the ingredients which usually go to make one. We feasted him upon the fat of the land—he had brought us glad tidings—nothing was too good for him. We gave him claret to drink, and he was too polite to refuse it—though he confided to me on a future occasion that it was very nasty. He rose from the table with a sigh, and went to bed in the keeper's room, next to mine. And, my goodness! how he snored that night! It was but a thin wooden wall, and he nearly threw it down with the vibration. As for me, I slept—whenever

a lull in the noise allowed me—and dreamed that A—— and I were being ringed by hares, and were on the point of being murdered by our pursuers, when we sprang upon the backs of two wild elk which happened to be passing at the moment, and were carried by them into the forest, where the elk threw us down on the ground and growled at us all night, ferociously. . . .

There was no end, apparently, to the bright sunny February weather. The day was as beautiful as any of its predecessors when we awoke and greeted it, and it was not many hours old before we were already seated in Matvei's sledge, with Matvei's self handling the ribbons, careering away as fast as Matvei's two ponies (rare ponies they were, too!) could draw us, in the direction of Ladoga Lake and their lordships, the elk.

Our route lay through the same sparkling surroundings of gemmed snow-fields and the silvered tracery of pine-woods, as I have already described. I was never tired of this fairy-land, and watched it with renewed delight each day; but, for the reader's sake, I will say no more about it on this occasion, and will hasten on to the scene of the prospective elk-chase. We found Yegor waiting for us. He reported that Lăkoo was on duty at the "ring," seeing that the beaters kept quiet,

and that the quarry had not—up to now—moved out of the charmed circle. The beaters had of course been placed prior to our arrival—quite a hundred of them (an elk-chase is not the cheapest of entertainments!), and were awaiting us with feelings considerably influenced by the state of the thermometer, the quicksilver having gone down to unfathomable depths. We did not keep them long. Matvei and Yegor placed us, and promptly disappeared in the forest to take up their own positions, and then give the signal. It was a large ring—it needs to be for elk—and they took some little time to reach their places. A—— and I were carefully hidden behind snow-laden bushes, and were dressed in the regulation white garment. I laid my smoothbore beside me on the snow, and held my rifle, and tried to convince myself that I was a fool to be so excited about three elk—two, one might call them, for the calf was not worth counting. After all, what were a couple of elk? there were plenty in Russia—any fool could shoot an elk.

These specious arguments did not carry the necessary conviction, and I continued to be excited until the signal, a shrill whistle, rang out; then I was doubly—nay! trebly excited. My pulses banged away — several new pulses, undiscovered till now,

seemed to come on with a rush. I was a throbbing mass of fevered humanity. One by one the voices took up the signal far away, and from all sides. Birds began to fly about—field-fares chiefly, and hares galloped by. Riabchicks darted through the pines, and settled to listen. The field-fares did not rest in one place, but shifted their quarters anxiously, not knowing where to go from the uproar. All sorts of birds and beasts appeared, from foxes and capercailzies to tiny woodpeckers and squirrels; but where were the elk? The shouts came nearer, but were still far away. Suddenly the uproar rose trebly loud, increasing in volume by bursts and subsiding, then rising once more to a frenzied pitch. I knew what that meant, the elk were trying to break through the ring—oh! dear and trusty beaters, don't let them out! A roar, as of triumph, followed, almost like an immediate answer to my prayer. Were they turned back?—had the beaters stood their ground? Undoubtedly so, for the noise continued and increased, approaching nearer every moment. What had become of the elk? and why did they not make for this, the only quiet corner? Even as the thought passed through my mind, I became aware of a presence. I had heard no intimation of its approach.

Was I dreaming? or was that the big bull elk standing and listening in a thinly-wooded space some hundred yards from me? I rubbed my eyes and stared. There was no doubt of it—it was indeed the bull, the very King of the Forest himself. Slowly I raised my gun: but, alas! the sun caught the glint of the polished barrel, and he saw it. Before the weapon was at my shoulder he had disappeared.

I saw A—— raise his gun, and slowly put it down again, and then again raise it and put it to his shoulder. I expected, momentarily, to hear him shoot; but once more he lowered the weapon and watched. Again the howls and shrieks redoubled in volume. The beaters were very near now, two hundred yards away, not more, and the elk were making another attempt to break through. What a pandemonium! They have failed again, to judge from the nature of the shouts and abusive screams, a translation of which is impossible—they were Zola-esque in their rugged realism, and referred in an uncomplimentary manner to the relatives of the elk. Bravo again, beaters! Suddenly I saw A—— excitedly raise his gun, and at the same moment the elk family came tearing through the trees between him and me, the bull leading, the cow almost at his shoulder, the calf

well in the rear. It was not a moment for cautious lifting of rifles and careful aiming—I raised my "piece," sighted the bull's shoulder, and fired; at the same instant I heard the report of A——'s shot. . . .

When shall I know such another moment of delirious joy?

The bull fell forward, ploughed the snow with his big head and turned an irregular somersault, the cow instantly following his example, while the calf disappeared among the trees. Dear old A——, he had shot the cow, then; how lucky we didn't both fire at the bull, and how awfully good of A—— to leave him to me. A—— and I both rushed towards the fallen giants; what a perfectly magnificent pair! The bull was stone dead; but the cow required a *coup-de-grâce,* which Matvei rushed in and administered; and in an instant grim death had deposed two of the monarchs of the forest.

I suppose most sportsmen feel that pang of regret in taking life which, I confess, never fails to give me a passing dig, whatever the creature be whose light of life I have just extinguished for ever. There is always a momentary feeling of guilt which mars, so long as it lasts, the full joy of a successful shot. I do not think it cruel to shoot animals: indeed, I believe that

if left alone they would probably die with far more of suffering than this instantaneous death by shot or bullet can cause them. It is the feeling that one is robbing them of their gift of life: the despoiling Nature of her free children, that I feel to be regrettable. But the feeling soon passes away in the triumph and satisfaction of success; and to have slain that glorious elk was indeed a triumph.

"Bravo, A——," I cried, as we met over our fallen quarry, "and thanks too, old chap. It was good of you to take the cow and leave that splendid old bull for me."

"My dear fellow," A—— said, "I did not leave the bull to you a bit in the world; I shot at the bull all right; I never shoot at a cow elk. Did you aim at the cow or the bull?"

"The bull," I faltered, and a great weight of foreboding forthwith took its seat upon my chest. A—— was a better shot than I; the bull was in all probability his.

"Then one of us has killed the cow by accident," he said: "hard luck for the cow!"

Alas! it was too true: the cow was struck on my side; I had not made sufficient allowance for the speed at which the animals were travelling, and had

clean missed the bull, while his consort (*Infandum Regina*, "the unfortunate queen," as the school-boy said and suffered for), had placed her big body in the way of my bullet, and died of it. It was a sad "take down."

"I tell you what," said A——, who will have his joke (generally a very poor one), even at the most inappropriate moments; "the thing I'm going to propose is often done, so don't get excited; you must get a pair of elk horns—one can buy them, you know—and have them stuck on to your old cow's head when it's stuffed; none will know that it's a bogus bull!"

I gave A—— a look before whose unspeakable contempt he quailed; but I learned, subsequently, that the plan proposed by A—— is really adopted by Russian sportsmen who have slain a cow elk, and desire to enjoy the superior prestige involved in the slaughter of a bull.

There was, however, in the midst of this sad "take down," one great consolation for me. It is the custom for a sportsman who has killed a bull to divide fifty roubles among the keepers, and to distribute immense largesse among the beaters, in honour of the occasion. This now fell to A——, and I watched the money being paid away with much inward rejoicing and with

glee unspeakable: *my* shekels were still my own. But A—— had yet another item of expense to bear on this occasion, besides the usual charges. Matvei brought up to us after the beat an old Finn woman, of at least seventy-five years of age, who, he told us, had turned back the elk entirely single-handed. The bull, it appeared, had come charging straight down upon her, whereupon this courageous old lady, standing her ground without yielding an inch, waved her thin old arms, and shrieked out her shrill abuse, to so good purpose that the huge creature stopped, turned round, and charged back into the ring, followed by the cow and her calf. A—— gave the old dame a rouble for her pluck, and I added a second, and very richly she deserved both.

When an elk is killed there is very little of him wasted. The body is eaten, principally by the beaters; it is not very nice. The head is, of course, stuffed; the skin is made into a carpet, but it is coarse stuff and slippery to walk upon. The four legs are used as supports for a chair or a music-stool, and very excellently do they answer the purpose. All this was done with our animals: their heads and skins journeying back with us to the lodge. It was quite a triumphal procession, for the old bull's head and horns

(seven points) stuck high up out of the sledge to tell the world of our glory and prowess. "The world," in this case, consisted of two big-eyed girls and one small boy, who rushed out, lightly clad, to see us pass, and stared, shading their eyes till we went out of sight.

The three keepers devoted the evening, as in duty bound, to Bacchus, in whose honour libations were poured for many hours: Vladimir had joined them, and a right noisy party they were. As for A—— and me, we dozed in our chairs, as usual, and wished we could decently go to bed at eight.

"I say, A——," I said, during a moment of wakefulness superinduced by an extra uproarious burst of merriment from the keeper's room, which was separated from us by a mere partition wall: "I wonder what became of the calf? Is it big enough, think you, to take care of itself?"

"Of course it is," said A——, yawning; "but I say, F—— old chap, how lucky for the calf that you didn't aim at the cow; *it* was next behind, you know!"

If A—— thought to wound me with this clumsy dart he must have been sadly disappointed; for when he turned his head to see how the shaft sped I was fast asleep again, and could not possibly have heard his rude innuendo. However, I am bound to confess, fortune did smile upon that calf!

XII

A WEEK AMONG THE SNOW-TRACKS—IV

NEXT morning A—— departed for town, the richer by a fine wolf-skin, a bull elk, a very brown physiognomy (the legacy of the Ostermanch sun and snow), and a pair of lungs which were very much the better for having conducted their untiring labours for a few days in the champagne-air of that most delightful of all moorland retreats. As for me, I determined to make the most of my last remaining day, in spite of being left companionless and alone. The big excitements of elk and lynx and wolves were probably over for the time; bears, if existing in the neighbourhood, were still asleep, safely snowed up and hidden from their enemies; but I could at least roam at will over the moors upon my trusty snowshoes, with a reasonable hope of finding willow-grouse and blackcock, not to mention a stray fox or a hare or two. Regarded from the point of view of the sportsman, the prospect of slaying such creatures as these after the glory of

knocking down, even accidentally, a huge elk, was tame; but with the added delight of wandering over moor and forest in search of tracks; flying the wooded slopes leading down to the river upon snowshoes, which, by this time, rarely failed to land me safely at the bottom; playing at hide-and-seek with pretty white grouse, and stalking that very wary old gentleman the blackcock-paterfamilias, I was not afraid that the hours, were they ten times as long, would hang heavily upon my hands.

So I got old Leeza to provide me with a goodly packet of sandwiches: took my flask with me—lest by leaving it at home I should be placing temptation in the path of others,—and went my ways.

I ought to have mentioned old Leeza before: let me do her this tardy justice now. Leeza was our housekeeper at Ostermanch, and a character. She was a Finn woman, and popularly supposed to be upwards of a hundred years old. She might have been any age from ninety upwards, judging by her wrinkled old face and hands; but as far as activity went, she could have put to shame many a woman of less than one fourth her years. She was greatly devoted to her English "barins," and the days of their arrival at the lodge were the red-letter days of her

poor old existence. She was a capital cook, and baked bread fit for the gods; and she catered for us as she loved us. Leeza considered all the keepers to be mere children, though some of them were elderly men, and she treated them as small boys. As for ourselves—we were boys too, in her eyes; and, by virtue of her age, the good old lady used to consider herself entitled to walk in and out of the bedrooms without ceremony, and without regard to the fact that the occupants might have arrived at that stage of dressing or undressed-ness when a lady's presence is a trifle embarrassing. A—— relates that one evening, having just returned from a long tramp over the moors, he was enjoying himself amazingly over a cold bath—dressed, of course, in the garb in which Nature had first presented him to an admiring world. Happening to look up suddenly, he was considerably jarred to observe old Leeza standing over him and watching his splashings in a sad and contemplative manner. She continued thus to look on for a minute or two until poor A——, feeling a little cold, began to think that he would like to stand up and get out, but, with natural modesty, hesitated to do so, in the hope that the old lady would soon end her

meditations over his innocent enjoyment, and take her departure. At last, just as the half-frozen A—— had abandoned all hope of being able to sit her out, and was on the point of making a rush for his towels, the old lady sighed twice, piped out in her old quavering treble, "*Ach! molodeoj, molodeoj!*" (ah! youth, youth!), and to A——'s intense relief, left the room.

She is dead now, poor old Leeza, like Matvei, and the ancient glories of Ostermanch, and the past generally;—as dead, that is, as things can be which are vividly remembered and loved.

There had been a heavy fall of snow during the night, so that the going on snowshoes this morning was of an entirely different character—very much easier, but also much slower. Tracks were all new to-day, for any mark in the freshly fallen snow must of course have been made since night. Consequently, whenever I came across a track, I was able to feel confident that the animal, whatsoever it was which had left its mark, could not be very far away. This consideration added great interest and excitement to my endeavours to circumvent a wily fox whose tracks I came upon. He led me such a dance, did that artful creature! I firmly believe that he was anxious to "do the

honours," by showing me as much as possible of the beauties of the country; for he took me round a considerable portion of the property—in and out of forest and moor, over the river and back towards the house, and round again by a detour to the point whence we started. I scented him once or twice, but I never saw him, and after a chase of about an hour's duration—in the course of which I never got so close as to frighten him out of his jog-trot, as I could see by the tracks—I reluctantly abandoned the pursuit.

My next attempt was to stalk a number of black-cock perched upon the top of some high pine-trees at the edge of the forest. They all appeared to be either sleepy or terribly dejected about something, and each one swung sadly upon his own particular twig, apparently without taking the smallest interest either in my movements, or in his fellows, or in anything whatever. . . . All the better for me! Cautiously and artfully I crept along, hiding behind the cover afforded by young snow-laden pines, of which there were numbers between myself and the birds. The snow was so soft that I was able to make my way over the intervening distance in almost absolute silence. It began to be exciting: I was within seventy yards now: sixty. . . . This is grand, I thought; how splendidly I

have stalked them: how much natural woodcraft a British sportsman may possess without being aware of the fact! Fifty yards . . . I should shoot at forty! Forty-five . . . there, they're off! . . . I am certain old blackcock know the exact range of a gun. Those birds had evidently been watching me all the time. I had noticed them raise their heads, and elongate their necks, and take a little interest in their toilettes some time before they departed; but I hoped for the best. I might have known that I was observed—the blackcock is far too wary to be caught napping, except at tok-time, when he is not answerable for his actions.

These artful birds, then, decamped—leaving me to mourn their departure with unburned cartridges; but as I watched them fast disappearing in the glorious sunshine, which caused their wings to flash again as they flew, they suddenly acted in a very surprising manner. As though with one consent the whole pack, consisting of twenty or thirty birds, abruptly swooped, like ducks about to settle splashing upon the bosom of a lake,—took a header and disappeared. Had I not been acquainted with the habits of the blackcock, I should have been much puzzled by this mysterious action on the part of the birds. But I was aware that

blackcock, after a heavy fall of snow, love to take thus a long swoop into the soft white depths, each bird tunnelling his way, by the impetus of his plunge, several feet diagonally under the surface, and remaining cradled comfortably there until morning and breakfast time, when each will leave his lodgings as he thinks fit. The open, in the midst of which this pack of blackcock had taken their headlong swoop into the snow, lay about half a mile from the spot whence I was watching them, and towards it I hastened, determined to take my revenge upon the wary birds, who had just proved too sharp to be stalked by daylight, by pouncing upon them before they could escape from the cells in which they had foolishly imprisoned themselves. But on the bare plain, at some point in which I knew the blackcock lay hid, there was nothing to guide one as to their exact position. I was therefore obliged to quarter the ground, hoping to come upon the little holes in the snow which would betray their hiding-place. It was the uncanniest thing in the world! Suddenly, from under my very nose—indeed, I think he must have knocked his head against my snowshoe—rose a fine blackcock. I had walked over the very hole in which he had nested himself. I could not very well miss him, though I was startled out of my

wits, for he was large and very close, and was going at no great speed—he had not had time to get steam up; therefore he bit the dust. At the sound of the shot, the even surface of the snow around me became in one instant peppered with black forms struggling out of their holes, and making off in all directions. Some seemed to be shot up from nowhere; with others the process could be seen, and these latter emerged with masses of soft snow clinging to and showering from their wings and tails, causing a little snow-storm as they flew along. It was a marvellous sight! Had they been taken by surprise, after spending some hours in the snow, I might have stood in my place and shot these beautiful birds at my leisure, for they would have risen one by one as they realised that something was not as it should be outside; but this pack had settled only a few minutes since, and were very much on the alert. Had I not walked over one of their number it is possible that not one of them would have risen; but one culprit having betrayed the spot, and paid the penalty, the rest considered that the game was up, and flitted from their cosy quarters. I may explain that the holes are very small, and extremely difficult to see in the bright sunshine. The whole pack, in this instance, took wing together, so

that I had but one barrel to expend upon them. That barrel was choked, and in my flurry I fired it at a bird which at that moment was doing its best to knock my hat off, as it rocketed itself out of the earth—or rather snow—at my feet. Where the shot went to I know not; but it did not lodge in that bird, and I conclude that it went somewhere else; there was plenty of room for it. It struck me that the foxes, if they ever happen upon one of these blackcock camps, must have a grand time. Old Mr. Fox can come quietly along, and dig up the blackcock one by one without frightening the rest, until he has murdered the whole pack, if so disposed. I sincerely hope he does not find them. If he does, it is of course by accident, for there is no track, and no scent either, until he actually reaches the holes in which the birds lie.

After this I spent some little time in tracking hares and foxes, with but little success. I had one great triumph, however. I had followed a hare for some distance, and determined to make an attempt to head and wait for her. So I made a detour, put on a mighty spurt for a quarter of a mile, and then hid behind a bush. Sure enough, after a minute or two I was rewarded by the spectacle of little miss Pussy —as white as the snow she ambled over—coming

leisurely along towards my ambush. She had not the faintest suspicion of danger ahead, and came hobbling along, sniffing at each snow-laden bush and yellow grass-tuft as she went. Her eyes shone quite brightly in the sun, and she seemed to be enjoying amazingly the fine weather and the nice soft new snow. I allowed her to approach within ten yards of my hiding-place, and then gave a low whistle. Friend Pussy instantly sat down to listen, looking about her and sniffing a little anxiously. I whistled again. This time she detected the right direction and turned her big bright round eyes straight towards me, lifting her long ears as she did so, and moving her whiskers about in an agitated way. Then suddenly I arose, ghost-like, from behind my ambush, and said "Bo."

In an instant Pussy was metamorphosed into the incarnate spirit of Flight. I had no intention of shooting her, for I did not relish the idea of carrying a heavy hare about for the rest of the day; therefore she lived to tell the tale of her dangerous adventure where pussies most do congregate, and I watched her with delight as she disappeared in the distance, now rising over some slight elevation, now lost in a dip of the ground, until I could no longer distinguish her fleeting white form amid the white of the snow.

Soon after this episode Matvei and Lákoo appeared. They had found no tracks of big game, and had come to assist me in my wanderings after small fry. They organised an impromptu battue for a fox, upon the Lookatch system. I must explain here that the shooting of foxes is not regarded in Russia as equally criminal, if not more so, than the murdering of human beings. Foxes are not hunted. There did exist, indeed, many years since, a pack of fox-hounds which the English colony contrived to support and hunted with some success at Gorella, near St. Petersburg; but at Ostermanch the shooting of foxes was at all times accounted a virtue. Therefore I felt no compunction whatever as to taking part in a beat which had for its object the slaughter of St. Reynard with powder and shot. There were plenty of fox-tracks about, and Matvei and Lákoo soon had one ringed. I hid myself, and the beat began. The keepers started a quarter of a mile from my position, walking towards me abreast, but about two hundred yards one from the other. Occasionally Matvei would give vent to a cry or a sound like the bark of a dog, or perhaps gently clap his hands; then Lákoo would, after a minute or two, do the same. I soon saw old Mr. Fox coming along. He was much puzzled, and

evidently thought he was being trifled with. There was not sufficient noise made by the keepers to startle him, yet there was enough to cause him to move cautiously away from it. If he showed signs of deviating from the straight line, a cry from one side or the other soon brought him back. It was beautifully managed! He paused every other moment and peered about, trying to catch sight of the extraordinary creatures, whoever they might be, who were responsible for the eccentric, but rather alarming, sounds. Then he would come on again, but always returning to the line which would bring him straight to my ambush. I think he saw Lákoo once, for he crouched behind a bush and stared back in the direction of that worthy. Then he trotted away towards me, rather quicker than before; but he did not proceed far. He soon twisted abruptly round again and had another long look. At last he made up his mind that perhaps it would be as well to finally take his departure, and he cantered on until he was quite close to me, looking very beautiful in the sunlight, and showing up wonderfully against the white background. I thought of him as the murderer of young game, the relentless and cruel enemy of hares and all other defenceless creatures; as the wicked, sly, pitiless,

wasteful ogre of the woods, and I pulled the trigger and executed him, and the keepers skinned him. His remains were left as a portion for hooded crows, of which there were plenty about, and as a warning to other members of his family that vengeance does, sometimes, overtake the wicked, and blot them out in the midst of their transgressions.

Lákoo had a curious experience that afternoon. We were all three walking through a rough belt of forest: it was very bad going for snowshoes, being simply a tangled mass of fallen tree-trunks and old roots, parts of which were buried in the snow and part exposed. Suddenly Lákoo, who was leading the way, disappeared. The next we heard of him was his excited voice, shouting something to Matvei in the Finnish language. Matvei was not as a rule an excitable person, but on this occasion he too seemed agitated, and, in reply to Lákoo's communication, hurried towards the abyss which had swallowed up his companion.

I hastened to join them, when I soon discovered that Lákoo had fallen through into a deserted *berloga*, the word used to signify the hibernating quarters of a bear. This retreat had been formed beneath the overhanging roots of a fallen pine, the snow having

drifted all round and over it, becoming fast frozen into a hard mass by means of the moisture contained in the breath of the torpid bear, for whose protection it had served. There were traces of the animal's late occupation, but it was impossible to calculate as to the exact period which might have elapsed since the den had been tenanted. Bruin had taken his departure before last night's snowfall; that at least was certain, for the fresh snow had obliterated all tracks leading out of the berloga. Matvei and Lákoo both loudly lamented that Bruin was not at home to us; but I could not help reflecting that if he had been there, it might have been exceedingly awkward, not to say disagreeable, for Lákoo. The latter, however, was much amused when I mentioned this view of the matter, and declared that the bear would have been terribly alarmed by the sudden appearance in his abode, unannounced, of a total stranger, and would undoubtedly have "evacuated" in Lákoo's favour.

But what if it had been a she-bear with cubs, friend Lákoo? In my humble opinion, our faithful Lákoo would have been a portion for foxes, or for very young Bruins, in an exceedingly short space of time! Lákoo, who entertains a great contempt for bears, did not agree with my view of the matter and its gruesome

possibilities: to do him justice, I believe he might have risen to the emergency, even though he had been precipitated into the very midst of a bear-family. We concluded that A—— and I must have disturbed old Bruin on one of the previous days by popping at the blackcock and other game in his neighbourhood. It was a pity that we did not hit upon the berloga while it was still tenanted (*I* should have had no cause to object if Lákoo did not!), for bears are very rare in Ostermanch, or, indeed, anywhere within a hundred miles of St. Petersburg. Towards the Alonetz and Archangel districts there are still numbers of them for those who can afford the luxury of a fortnight's bear-shooting; but this is a most expensive amusement, and few can indulge in it.

After this episode we made beats for hares, black-cock, willow-grouse; anything we could find. There was not much bloodshed; but there was supreme happiness in spite of that: the happiness of breathing the air and of seeing many of God's beautiful creatures closely. I would as soon have been without a gun, if but to stand and observe and admire the countless beauties around me! This was my last day at Oster-manch, and a rare day it was. There was hardly any creature having a vested interest in moor and forest

that I did not see, always excepting wolves, lynxes, elk, and bears. There were wolves about, but we did not attempt to ring them; this would have been useless in view of the fact that I had fired occasional shots all through the day. But I saw a large cock capercailzie—yea! and shot him also, as he hurtled over my head in the thick. That was a bird indeed! his tok-plumage was upon him, and in the bright afternoon sun he came along like a river of light. Alas! that he should have fallen before he had ever uttered a challenge to his peers, or once vaunted his magnificence before the chosen fair. Yet, why lament him? there were a hundred others, and more, as magnificent as he; his fickle queen would not mourn him long; she had other swains around her. It was written that he should die and his place be taken by another. Requiescat! If hung long enough, and treated scientifically, he will taste pleasantly in the mouth of his enemies. Put him in the bag, Lákoo, and carry him home: his glory is departed; he is dead; moreover, it was a good shot, though I say it that slew him. I caused no baser blood to flow after the downfall of King Capercailzie the Great. His noble life was the last that went out during my week at Ostermanch, for I felt that the forest had no more

to give me; it had offered me of its best during my stay; it had shown me many beautiful sights and creatures, and read me many an eloquent sermon, and whispered many a secret, unguessed before, of the meanings of things too much neglected; and now I must leave it!

I felt, as I bade the keepers farewell the following morning, and took my seat behind Vladimir redivivus, that I could never hope to spend another week so profitably to soul and body as this one now ended had proved; and that in leaving behind me the forest, I was turning my back upon a dear and intimate friend, a wise philosopher, and a guide who—if I could see more of him—would lead me in the way I should walk in.

Vladimir, marvellously sprightly after his long revel, is flourishing his whip and calling his ponies dreadful names (by way of making a good start)—the sledge bounds forward, and I am on my way home. Once more I turn, ere we are out of sight of the lodge, to feast my eyes with a last look at the forest, bathed, as it has been for a week, in glorious sunlight. How silent, how majestic, how beautiful it is, with its numberless army of sentinel pines watching jealously over the teeming, unseen life within it! The pines

seem to nod farewell to me as I gaze.—Good-bye, Ostermanch! short be the time until our next meeting! And when I die, O Ostermanch, if the doctrine of Transmigration of Souls should, by an off-chance, prove to be the correct one, may my soul come to dwell within the limits of thy pathless forests—there to live on as one of thy capercailzie children, reigning in undisputed sway, free and happy, and fearless and noble,—until some mean sportsman comes with his death-rod and sends my soul in search of lodgings farther afield!

XIII

BRUIN

ALLOW me to introduce you, reader, to Ivan Ivanovitch Medvedyeff, of the village of Karatigin, in the government of Alonetz, in Northern Russia. Ivan Ivanovitch is a sporting character, the only one for miles around, and a very keen sportsman too; doubtless, if game were preserved in this remote part of the empire, Ivan would be a great poacher; but here he may kill game of all sorts to his heart's content without the need to break any laws, and nobody will interfere with him. He is free to wander unchidden over miles upon miles of fine shooting country, accompanied by his aged cur, and armed with an equally antique specimen of the gun-maker's craft. The dog looks as though Nature had meant it to be a pointer, but the good intentions of Nature have been frustrated, and the cur has turned out a curious mixture, a sort of pointing lurcher, or lurching pointer. Neither dog nor gun present a

particularly business-like appearance, and yet each, when engaged in its respective department during the finding and killing of game, is as sure as death in its work. It would not suit Ivan if this were not so, for to him a shot missed is a serious matter. Powder and shot are expensive articles in the Alonetz government, and Ivan's sport is a matter of *L. S. D.*, or rather of roubles and copeks. It must not be inferred, however, from the above that Ivan is a better marksman than any other respectably good shot; he does not very often waste powder and shot upon misses: true; but that is partly because he generally expends it upon the unsuspecting tree-partridge as it sits aloft on its pine-bough, thinking, like the historic water-man, of nothing at all; or else upon the helpless young coveys of black-game and willow-grouse, or, in his season, the confiding "Double" (solitary snipe), the exact bearings of which have been discovered with unerring accuracy by Sharik, the dog. Here again Ivan makes as sure of "value" for his powder and shot as circumstances will permit. He does not stand and wait at the tail of his dog until the birds shall see fit to rise —oh dear no! Sharik's education embraces a special manner of dealing with coveys of young game. He is taught to find the birds, to approach as quietly and

as closely as possible, and then (close your eyes, my sporting reader), to pounce suddenly upon the covey and catch, but not maul, one or more members of the family. Black-game do not rise *en famille*, as any one acquainted with their ways is aware; and therefore Ivan is frequently enabled to see and to "pot" several before they have made up their minds to rise from the earth and risk a flight. Our sportsman finds a market for his wares by retailing them over the country once a week in summer-time, while in winter he accumulates his frozen game until he has sufficient to make it worth his while to go further afield for a market in order to secure a better price for his goods.

But it is not by his trade in game that Ivan Ivanovitch makes his principal profits. When November comes round, and with it the first fall of snow, then Ivan takes his dog and his gun and sallies forth with light and expectant heart, for he knows that now his great opportunity has arrived. Sharik knows all about it too, and is as pleased as his master. The fact is, Ivan's principal business is in bears.

Some of my readers may not be conversant with the proceedings in which Mr. Bruin indulges, just before settling down in his berloga, or winter quarters. As these proceedings are somewhat original and

interesting, I propose to give, in this place, a short account of a specimen bear's movements on the first day of snow. Mr. Bruin, like Ivan Ivanovitch, is anxiously waiting for this first fall of snow. It is his signal for settling down to his long-desired rest. He is growing sleepy and torpid; food is getting scarce too, and taking one consideration with another, life is really not worth living. So he wanders aimlessly about, yawning and rubbing his eyes with his paw, for all the world like a sleepy child. He longs for the snow and the delightful repose which winter brings him. But at last the welcome snow-fall comes. Then Bruin suddenly develops remarkable activity, and acts, as he firmly believes, with extraordinary smartness and cunning. He has no very distinct idea of the existence of Ivan Ivanovitch and his like, perhaps; but he possesses a vague consciousness that there do exist such things as enemies in this world of trouble, and these enemies, whether two or four-legged, he will now, he thinks, proceed to outwit. But hush! he must dissemble. It is clear, even to his torpid intelligence, that in this tell-tale snow it would be easy enough for anything in the nature of an enemy to track him down to his berloga, the exact situation for which Bruin has by this time

selected. This being the case, says Bruin to himself, with the bearish equivalent for our wink of the left eyelid, this being the case, I shall proceed, ha! ha! to outstrategise him! Then Bruin, in extreme good humour over his own smartness, proceeds to behave in a very astonishing manner. He spends a whole day in walking round and round, and in and out, making short excursions in the direction of each point of the compass, and then again round about the spot which he has chosen for his hibernating nest. This labyrinth of tracks in the snow will be sufficient, he thinks, to bewilder any possible enemy, however crafty; and so, with a chuckle of satisfaction, poor Bruin enters his berloga, as evening approaches, fully convinced that he has accomplished all that is either possible or necessary to secure perfect safety, and to assure the due preservation of the secret of his hiding-place.

But alas! for his cunning; Ivan Ivanovitch and his dog are also up and about, and Sharik and his master are individually and collectively sharper than any bear that ever was born. They soon find Mr. Bruin's track in the snow, and then their work is easy. Once they have caught sight of the familiar circles and labyrinths which tell of poor Bruin's crude efforts to out-general,

with subtle ingenuity, the artful guile of his enemies, if such should be in the neighbourhood, they mark the place, or rather Ivan does, while Sharik the dog looks on and wags his tail intelligently, as who should say: "All right, I understand; chop a bit of bark off that tree—that's it; *I* shall know how to manage the rest of this business by and by!" Then they depart, but only to return a week or so later. On this second visit to the locality Sharik is the chief actor. He finds, with prompt and unerring accuracy, the exact spot—generally at the root of a fallen pine-tree—where the bear is by this time fast asleep, and dreaming, in fancied security, of a good time coming, next July, in Ivan Ivanovitch's oat-field. The fallen pine has made an ideal recess for him, for the snow drifts up against the boughs and root, and soon completely hides him from view, while his breath speedily converts the whole into an impenetrable mass of frozen snow, ice, and pine twigs and needles. Having thus discovered the bear's exact whereabouts, and perhaps that of several other Bruins besides, Ivan prepares for a long journey to St. Petersburg in order to find purchasers for the information of which he is now master, and which is a marketable article. He first loads his sledge with a full cargo of frozen game, mostly tree-partridges or

riabchiks, but there are also some of those beautiful willow-grouse, brown in the summer, but snow-white now, which form so familiar a spectacle hanging in forlorn and frozen wretchedness outside our English poulterers' shops, and which are sold so cheap to an English public, who know little of their history, and who do not seem to appreciate, to any great extent, their virtues.

Arrived at St. Petersburg, Ivan Ivanovitch first disposes of his load of game, selling it at the current price of the day in the "frozen market," after which he proceeds to hunt up his own particular bear-clients, and to these he makes over, for a consideration, his knowledge of the berlogi which he and Sharik have found. Generally from forty to fifty roubles (four to five pounds), is the price obtainable for each bear shown to the sportsman. Ivan gets his money whether the bear be killed or not, so long as the animal proves to be in the berloga.

Matters having reached this stage, it only remains for the sportsman, guided by Ivan Ivanovitch, to make the best of his way to the spot where poor unsuspecting Bruin is enjoying the long winter's sleep from which he is now to be awakened; given to understand, like a condemned criminal, that his last hour is at hand:

and, as he emerges dazed and sleepy, to see what in the world all the noise is about, executed in cold blood before he has time to invoke the proverbial Jack Robinson.

In former years the killing of half-torpid bears, as they crept slowly and unwillingly from their berlogi, was wont to be a more exciting and, if I may say so, a more sportsmanlike matter. Then the sportsman carried no rifle; he was armed with a bear-spear only —a formidable-looking staff of hard seasoned wood, with a terrible steel blade at the end, double-edged and sharp as a razor. With this weapon alone the huntsman used to meet his quarry and generally overthrew him, but was occasionally himself overthrown; the procedure being in this wise: the sportsman, with his henchman, the latter carrying a dagger, having approached the berloga, and finding that the bear is lying fast asleep within, would immediately set the dog or dogs on. If these failed to rouse the comatose individual inside, stones were thrown. If these did not avail, a pole was cut, and with it Bruin was literally turned out, his temper being by this time scarcely under that perfection of control which every respectable bear should endeavour to exercise, even when matters are "going contrairy." Possibly he would go for the

dogs, imagining them, as the most noisy, to be the prime authors of this attack upon his repose. If so, so much the worse for them and for the chance of a kill, because he might easily escape by following the yelping dogs into the forest, perhaps catching and slaying them there, and then making off with flying colours in undisputed triumph. On the other hand, if he elected to attack the human enemy standing ready to hand just in front of his nose, then commenced that exciting struggle which must end either in his own death or in the overthrow of his enemy. The sportsman has of course prepared himself for the desired attack; he has doffed his snowshoes, and secured a firm foothold in the well-trodden snow upon which he has taken his stand. He grips his spear tightly with both hands, the left forward, raising the point to the level of the bear's shoulder and resting the butt against the ground behind him. Bruin, resolving to make short work of his enemies and go back to bed, rushes at him and impales himself upon the spear-point, giving vent to a roar of rage and pain as he does so. Now comes the tug of war. If the spear break or slip the sportsman will go no more a-sporting. He must hold it as inflexible and steady as Fate—and he finds his work cut out to achieve this. The bear,

snarling and fighting and tearing at the spear, strains every nerve to get at and hug or tear to pieces his detested tormentor, though it cost him his last breath to do so. But the more he struggles forward, the deeper goes the cruel steel into his flesh, and though he fights like a mad thing the struggle is unequal. Feeling that the bear's efforts have wearied him, and that his strength is failing, the man now assumes the offensive. He raises the butt from the ground, and using all his force pushes back at the bear. For a few moments it is any one's battle, for Bruin will not yield, and even now may still tear the spear from his antagonist's hand. If he succeeds in doing so, and the henchman is not at hand to rush in and plunge the dagger into his throat —then, farewell, sportsman! Henchmen have been known to bolt at this critical stage of the proceedings, leaving the master to his fate, and returning some hours later to find man and bear lying dead together; but fortunately Russian keepers are usually made of better stuff, and stand by their employers in the moment of danger.

But our fight is ending at last. Bruin's eyes are glazing, and his strokes at the spear-shaft are growing feebler and more spasmodic. He is scarcely pushing at all now, and his breath comes from his frothy

mouth, raspy and hoarse with the blood which chokes its passage. Now the sportsman makes his supreme effort. Summoning all his energy and strength he puts it forth in one mighty push. The bear totters, struggles for his footing, sways once or twice—nearly wrenching the staff from his enemy's grasp, and with a long groan or sigh falls over on his back—dead.

An old friend of mine, who in former years encountered and slew many bears with the spear, has shown me one of the weapons with which, on several occasions, he fought and conquered. It was torn and splintered almost to shreds by the claws of one of his victims. But my friend—an English gentleman, who earned and deserved, and still holds, a great name in Russia, as the most intrepid and successful hunter ever known in that country, eventually grew dissatisfied with the exciting method of bear-hunting which I have endeavoured to describe: it was not sufficiently dangerous to please him; he required something still more adventurous, and took to chasing bears entirely alone, armed with nothing but a hunting knife, and running them down on snowshoes. When Bruin rushed from his berloga, in full and fierce pursuit of the dogs which had been sent in to arouse him from his slumbers, this venturesome sportsman would follow,

and seldom indeed was the occasion when he failed to overtake and account for his quarry; though, as he has many times admitted, he had more than one very narrow escape for his life. It was undoubtedly a very dangerous proceeding, and I have never heard of any other sportsman emulating his example. As things are managed to-day, the most timid individual may go bear-shooting with absolute impunity; for, armed with a good rifle, and accompanied by a friend similarly provided, while perhaps the keeper is standing close behind with a third weapon, it is hard indeed if he cannot stop poor sleepy Bruin before that comatose individual has proceeded very far from his lair. And yet, even under present conditions, which certainly appear at first sight to have removed out of court every possible element of danger, the unforeseen will occasionally occur, as the following unvarnished narrative may testify. Two gentlemen, the Baron H—— and his friend Colonel Panoff, having purchased the rights over a hibernating bear, which the Ivan Ivanovitch of this transaction declared to be one of the very largest he had ever seen, took sledge and drove away to Ostrof, a village close to the spot where the animal was known to be concealed: the sportsmen being well

provided with rifles, revolvers, knives, green coats, Tyrolese hats, and all the paraphernalia with which foreigners about to indulge in a little sport love to surround themselves.

The berloga reached and the bear dislodged, the baron, who had secured first shot, fired, and to his great delight saw Mr. Bruin, who was in truth an enormous fellow, weighing about fifteen poods (a pood being a trifle over 35½ lbs.), fall prostrate, motionless, and to all appearance as dead as he need be. The baron, jubilant and triumphant, handed his rifle to the keeper, together with his revolver, knife, and all the *etceteras*, directing the man, as he did so, to return to the sledge, distant some two hundred yards, and fetch the bottle of champagne and glasses, which had been provided in anticipation of this victorious moment. Panoff leaned his rifle against a tree, and joined the baron, who had now seated himself upon a fallen trunk, close to the prostrate bear.

"What a magnificent specimen!" says triumphant Baron H——.

"Fine creature," assents Panoff, who is not quite so jubilant as his friend, which is only natural, considering that he has recently lost the toss for first shot, and with it his chance of the bear.

"Wouldn't it be awkward if he were suddenly to get up now and go for us?" he added with a laugh.

"Get up," said the baron, "why, he's as dead as Cæsar,—look here!" So saying, he slid off the tree-trunk, and administered upon the carcass of the prostrate bear a prodigious kick with his heavy shooting boots. What was his horror and dismay when the dead bear, with a roar which might have been heard five miles off, immediately rose to his full height, gushing out streams of blood and froth from his mouth as he did so, advanced a couple of yards towards the horrified baron, who was far too astonished to get out of his way, and fell bodily forward with his paws over the sportsman's shoulders, forcing that terrified individual down upon his back, and himself pitching over on the top of him, growling fiercely and spluttering blood and foam. Panoff, who was far from being a coward, took a step towards his rifle, a proceeding which caused the bear to place one huge paw over the baron's chest and chin, in order to make sure of him, while he fixed his wicked-looking eyes upon the colonel.

"For Heaven's sake, don't move a finger, Panoff," whispered poor H——, who was marvellously cool under the circumstances; "if you do, he'll murder

me on the spot and then go for you; you must keep perfectly still, and let him fix his attention on you; he suspects you, and will not dare to move if you don't."

Sure enough, the bear lay perfectly still and never moved so much as a claw, but kept his eyes fixed upon Panoff.

This position of affairs remained unchanged for five or six minutes, a period which seemed an eternity to the baron, who was half suffocated by the weight of the enormous creature. Then, at last, the keeper approached near enough to understand the position of affairs, and to hear the whispered instructions of the baron.

"Creep up behind the colonel," gasped poor H——, "and take his rifle; then shoot the bear behind the shoulder; but aim carefully, and for Heaven's sake, don't shoot me!"

Luckily for the baron this keeper happened to be a man of nerve and a fair marksman, else had the fate of that sportsman been a very miserable one, in which bullet and bear's fang might have been equally implicated. However, things turned out more pleasantly, for Matvei crept up as directed, aimed very carefully, and shot the bear through the heart. The

massive creature loosened its hold, shivered, and rolled off the half-stifled baron, releasing that worthy from a position which, besides being terribly dangerous, must have been unpleasant in the extreme, for the bear's blood had never ceased to drip over his face, and, as H—— declared afterwards, the smell of the brute's fœtid breath had nearly caused him to faint away, and was undoubtedly the most disagreeable part of the adventure. However, all's well that ends well; the bear was dead enough now, and the champagne was very soothing: besides which the baron had become the hero of an adventure which, as a subject of conversation for all time, was well worth all the danger and discomfort to which he had been subjected.

So much for Ivan Ivanovitch, his bears, his sportsmen, and the *chasse aux berlogues.* But Bruin may occasionally be met with without the assistance of Ivan Ivanovitch. Sometimes the unexpected happens, for this life is full of surprises; and when taking part in any sort of a battue, in the wilds of Russia, it is as well to be prepared for all emergencies. In other words, while engaged in the mildly exciting occupation of watching for the harmless blackcock to fly over his head, or for the equally inoffensive hare to dart between his legs, the prudent sportsman must

not be disconcerted by the sudden apparition of a large bear "heading" straight for his ambush. Such a circumstance happened to a friend of mine, but the Britisher was quite equal to the occasion. With the rapidity of thought he dislodged one of the No. 4 cartridges with which his gun was loaded, and replaced it with a bullet—one or two of which, to be prepared for all eventualities, he invariably carried in his pocket when out shooting in Russia. On this occasion my friend established, I think I may safely say, a record; for with his right barrel he cut short the career of that bear, while with his left—which was choked—he neatly brought down a fine black-cock which had the misfortune to select that particular moment to cross his line of vision. This was something like a right and left. The bear proved to be one of the largest which this man of many bears had ever seen.

A bear, in common with most other animals, will always prefer to escape from a dangerous position without risking its skin, but poor Bruin has the disadvantage of being the possessor of a shockingly bad temper, and his discretion is apt to fail him at critical moments of his career. He is a slave to the most impetuous floods of fury, which seem to overwhelm

him in an instant on the smallest provocation; and a bear, which has given every indication of cowardice and a desire to avoid a fight, will often, if slightly wounded, turn upon its adversary with the utmost fury; in which case it is well for the sportsman if he is prepared with a second barrel. A good example of Bruin's occasional ferocity is to be found in the perilous rencontre, many years ago, which an English sportsman experienced with a bad-tempered member of the family. The gentleman in question was roaming the forest in search of game, attended by a Russian keeper, who at the moment happened to be carrying his master's rifle, when they encountered suddenly an enormous bear. The keeper promptly did what was probably the very most foolish thing open to him. He first of all ran straight away, rifle and all; but when he reached a point about a hundred yards distant, his conscience probably smiting him, he turned and fired at the bear, which at that moment was retreating as quickly as it could in the opposite direction. As ill luck would have it, he did what he probably would not have achieved again in a hundred attempts; his bullet actually struck the animal in the soft flesh of one of its hind legs. This was quite enough for poor old choleric Bruin. He

turned round like a demon possessed, and catching sight of poor X——, the Englishman who was close to him, rushed headlong at him. X—— could not climb a tree in his snowshoes, and even if he had made the attempt, the bear could have "given him points" at that sort of thing; so he acted in the only possible way under the circumstances; he fired point-blank at the beast with his revolver, getting three or four barrels off before he was reached and hugged. Bear and man fell together, and the keeper, turning away his eyes from the closing scene of horror, ran for his life, throwing away the rifle as he did so, lest it should prove an awkward item in the story which he must concoct to tell at home. Haggard, breathless, and in whiteness outvying the snow around him, this valiant person shortly afterwards rushed into the village *kabák*, or drinking shop, where he found assembled the starost, or head man of the village, the ooriadnik or sub-constable, and a posse of moujiks, all engaged in drinking, chatting, and playing cards, the usual winter-day's occupation of Russian villagers. To these he told his tale—his own tale—not mine as told above: he explained how he and his master had been scouring the forest in search of tracks of any creature, small or great, that

happened to be abroad; how to them thus wandering had appeared, without warning, the very most enormous bear that human eye had ever beheld; probably, as he expressed it, the tsar of the forests. The barin (gentleman) had immediately fired at the creature, he said, but the bullet glanced off from his forehead, and with red flames proceeding from mouth and eyes, the terrific monster had then fallen upon the poor English barin (here the keeper evinced a degree of emotion which did him infinite credit in the eyes of his awestruck listeners), killed him with one blow of the paw (Gregory's sobs almost obscured his narrative at this point), and instantly commenced to eat him; how he, Gregory, had thereupon seized a huge pine-bough and belaboured the tsar of the forests over the head and back; how the bear at this had immediately left the barin and rushed with terrific roars after himself, Gregory; and how, by the direct intervention of his patron saint, St. Gregory, who had then and there appeared in robes of white and driven off his pursuer, he had eventually and providentially escaped, and here he was.

This story occasioned, as was only natural, the intensest excitement in the village. After a hurried consultation it was decided to send for the nearest

priest, who should be requested to come at once and to bring with him his largest ikon, together with any *diachoks*, or readers, that he happened to have in stock. The ecclesiastic, thus summoned, arrived with commendable expedition, driving over from the nearest *selo* (a selo is the centre village of a group, and contains the church for the district), and bringing with him a very large ikon. The villagers had by this time assembled in force, and had armed themselves with hatchets, pitchforks, rakes, and anything they could lay hands upon, and were all ready for the priest to lead them forth to battle with the spirits of evil. A procession was formed, the priest with his ikon being placed at the head of it, a position which that good man accepted, as in duty bound, but not without much inward trepidation; and then the whole concourse moved solemnly forward through the forest towards the fatal spot where the tragedy had been enacted. Arrived there, the first object which the priest and his companions beheld was the dead body of an enormous bear lying prone upon the snow, which was dyed scarlet for several feet around it. But to the horror of all present, there was not the slightest trace of the poor barin, excepting his fur cap and his revolver.

Gregory's tale was only too true, then, and the unfortunate Englishman had been eaten up, flesh and bones and boots and all! What a terrific animal must the tsar of the forests have been to have thus consumed a whole barin, clothes and all, though himself wounded to death at the time! what an appetite he must have enjoyed in health! Perhaps St. Gregory had returned and slain the monster? So the priest anathematised poor dead Bruin, and the procession made the best of its way home again, where, for the next week or two, candles before the ikon of St. Gregory became the order of the day. The sequel is instructive. A month after the stirring episode which I have just described, a pale, sickly-looking gentleman drove up one fine morning to the door of Gregory's cottage, alighted from his sledge, and presented himself before the eyes of Gregory, causing those features to start with terror and amazement from their sockets; for it was none other than the English barin himself—he that was eaten, all but his fur cap! He had come to claim his rifle and to accuse the cowardly Gregory of deserting him in the hour of need. It appeared that the bear had fallen with its victim, and with its last dying effort had succeeded in clawing his head and face so terribly

that poor X——'s scalp was pulled right over his eyes; and when, an hour later, an old woman roaming the woods in search of fuel wandered, providentially, close to the spot where bear and sportsman lay bleeding together, she did not at first sight recognise his mauled head as that of a human being, and was for taking her departure leaving well alone, lest the huge bear should rouse himself and fall upon her; but luckily for X—— she caught sight of a snowshoe protruding from beneath the monster's body, and rightly concluding that the mangled thing must therefore be part of a man, she contrived to pull him out, slid and tilted him, with difficulty, upon her small hand-sledge, dragged him to her hut, washed and doctored his wounds with herbs, sewed his scalp as well as she could in its place, and, in a word, saved his life.

As for the brave henchman, he never again occupied that proud position among his fellow moujiks which the village sportsman generally enjoys: and as for poor St. Gregory (who really was not in any way to blame in the matter), after the exposure of his namesake, he had to do without the candles which an admiring but mistaken village community had hastened to burn at his shrine. I believe the

foregoing anecdote to be true in its main features, though possibly it has accumulated details in the course of a somewhat extended existence. So far, however, as concerns the behaviour of Bruin under provocation, the story may be accepted as absolutely correct. Bruin's temper is very near the surface, and it needs but little provocation to rouse the sleepiest of his species to incredible ferocity. At the same time, any unarmed and unprepared "human" meeting a member of the family enjoying a stroll in his native woods, may trust the latter to be at the very least as frightened as himself, and, if not interfered with, to be the first of the party to run away!

XIV

A WOLF BATTUE

"FOUR wolves ringed."

Such was the brief but joyful intelligence brought to my hosts, by the telegraph from Dubrofka, one magnificent winter's day. The month was February, the time of day early morning, the place St. Petersburg.

We had been awaiting a telegram for many days, for I had been promised a wolf battue, and longed to add this experience to the now considerable list of delights which good fortune, under the guidance of my hospitable friends, had afforded me during my sojourn in the Russian capital. And here let me explain, before proceeding further, that in the north of Russia wolves are not hunted, as in the south, with *gontchi* hounds. Sportsmen in the northern portion of the realm trust principally to the battue, relying on the skill of their keepers for the finding and "ringing" of the animals. The battue is not, however, the only

form of wolf *chasse* in vogue. There is besides a very simple device by which wolves are occasionally fooled to their doom, and to which I have alluded in a former chapter. In this style of *chasse* a young pig, selected for the strength of his vocal organs, plays a very important part. All the sportsmen have to do is to drive about the forest at nightfall, occasionally twitching the tail of the porker, who will instantly apprise every wolf within a radius of a mile or two of his whereabouts, when the latter, if within hearing, will promptly respond to the call, and possibly afford an easy shot. I have experienced this *dolce far niente* style of wolf-shooting, and found it delightful (though I have reason to believe that the pig thought otherwise), but in the battue was my first invasion of wolf-dom, and the battue I shall now attempt to describe.

We had been awaiting a summons in one direction or another, as I have said, for days. For the *lookachi*, a variety of scientific hunters whose merits are peculiar and original, had been despatched in one direction to look for lynx tracks, in order to afford me a chance of making acquaintance with that beautiful but rare creature before I left the country; while at Dubrofka the head keeper of the English shooting club, whose lodge is situated close to the village of

that name, had received instructions to employ himself and his underlings in looking out for wolves. His orders were first to find the wolves, or rather their tracks, then to "ring" them — that is, to describe circles from the track as a centre until a circle has been made with no footprints leading out of it. When such a circle or ring has been successfully made, with absolute certainty as to the track *into* the ring being the only track, it may be assumed that the wolves have settled down for a rest, perhaps to dine, perhaps to take a siesta: anyhow, they are "ringed." A keeper will sometimes follow a travelling family of wolves for hours, running round and round them in wide circles, without seeing or being seen, before he gets a chance of securely including them in his ring. When wolves are known to be in the neighbourhood, however, a wise keeper will take certain steps to attain his end, by which the process of ringing the quarry is rendered comparatively simple. In a word, he invites the wolves to dinner. This he does, not, needless to say, by the usual process of penmanship and stationery, but by first purchasing an elderly horse whose working days are over, or perhaps a cow whose life has become a burden to her on account of advanced age or sick-

ness, or maybe a dog—toothless and useless—whose master is no longer willing to support him, and is glad to accept a glass of *vodka* and a salted herring in lieu of his further services. The banquet having then been procured, it is conveyed, or rather *led*, for its legs have not as yet been converted into joints, by its new master into the woods, tied to a tree, and sacrificed.

Here Ivan Ivanovitch leaves his victim, having first skinned it for reasons economical, and hies him to his home, or more probably to the nearest drinking shop, or *kabák*, to await events. When the wolf-feast that is to be has acquired that intensity of perfume which leaves no doubt, for miles around, of its presence (a few days will effect this), Ivan Ivanovitch comes forth from his *kabák*, or from the bosom of his family, feeling, no doubt, that a run in the fresh air will do him good. His snowshoes are got out and strapped on, his long staff, like an alpenstock, taken in hand, and he is off and away to scour the country for traces of his invited guests. If any wolves have chanced to be sauntering within a radius of a few miles of the banquet prepared for them, the invitation to which is now floating upon the breeze in every direction, wafted to rich and poor and to all

and every creature alike with indiscriminate and sumptuous hospitality, those wolves, it may be assumed with absolute conviction, have, on receiving notification of the feast, put off all other engagements and turned their steps instanter in the direction indicated.

Now, a feasted wolf is a very much easier matter to deal with than a wandering and hungry wolf. The latter will amble sadly along for days, seeking something to devour, not too proud to chase a hare or even a squirrel, if he gets the chance, and delighted to help himself to any offal or refuse which he is fortunate enough to find in or near the villages which happen to lie in his line of march. If any little dog, not large enough to inspire him with terror or anxiety, comes to contest his right to the good things thus providentially left in his way, or to apprise its owners of the presence of Mr. Wolf in the village street, that small dog will be sought in vain when the family assembles at the breakfast-table next morning, and his place will know him no more. But a wolf for whom a banquet has been prepared such as I have endeavoured to describe will not think of leaving such a charming locality. He is very much obliged to Ivan Ivanovitch, and intends, all being well, to

accept his hospitality so long as he is pleased to extend it. He will lodge over there, he thinks, among those big trees a mile further on. So having said his grace—which consists of a satisfied sound, beginning with a loud yawn and developing into a howl—over his first meal, he gives a lazy list to his tail, and trots slowly away with the air of one who says, "I'm off for a siesta," turning round once or twice to have a last look at the remains of his late feast, and to lick his lips in delightful reminiscence of it, ere he finally disappears in the thick cover he has selected for his lodgings.

This is Ivan's opportunity. He soon hits upon Mr. Wolf's tracks, and it gives him but little trouble to describe the fatal circle round that gorged and sleepy individual.

The ring once formed, beaters are engaged at forty to fifty copecks per head for the day, while a keeper is sent post haste to the nearest railway station, in order to despatch a telegram summoning the sportsmen to the battue. The beaters are now conducted by Ivan Ivanovitch to the portion of ground in the midst of which the unsuspecting wolf is sleeping off the effects of his too generous breakfast. In silence as of death, and under the influence of terrible threats

of penalties to be inflicted if the slightest whisper is uttered or sound of any sort made, the party of thirty or forty men and women, with, perhaps, two or three boys, makes its way to the charmed circle, whose circumference is anything from half a mile upwards. Here each person is carefully placed by Ivan Ivanovitch, and individually threatened and frightened into preserving strict silence, it may be for hours, until the sportsmen shall have arrived, and the signal, a loud shrill whistle, be given by himself. Then, and not till then, they are to jump to their feet and close in, yelling and shrieking, to a point indicated. Five copecks extra to each beater for every wolf killed, adds Ivan Ivanovitch, "and a *vedro* of *vodka* for the lot." This last sentence acts like fire upon the minds of those beaters. They sit or lie in the snow, and will so sit or lie for hours, motionless, scarcely breathing, their heroic souls resolved to do or die, to suffer untold agonies of cold and hunger rather than to make a sound and jeopardise the *vodka*—for a *vedro* of *vodka*, and *carte blanche* to "go as you please" at it, is the *summum bonum* of a Russian moujik.

Such had been the preliminaries to the telegram which A—— received on that eventful morning. The head keeper, Gavril, had purchased the necessary

quadruped four days since, and the wolves had done what was expected of them, as wolves should—there were four of them, as the telegram informed us—and nothing remained but for us to arrive and do our part. But there I am wrong. The arriving came afterwards. First there was the most delicious drive that ever exhilarated the heart of man, and caused him to thank God, in his soul, that he had been born into so beautiful a world. Russia in February, if the day is a fine frosty one and the previous one happens to have been warm and "thawy," is fairyland. The sun in that month of hard frost has broken through the gloom which shrouds the country for the previous three or four months, and seems to shine with an exuberance and brilliance which is marvellous. If it thawed on the preceding day, then every tree and bush is delicately fringed with a wide frill of ineffably beautiful rime, which the sun illuminates but does not thaw. The effect of a forest scene on such a day is more lovely than any who have not seen would easily believe. The snow at your feet is an endless, dazzling area of diamonds, each one scintillating more beautifully than its neighbour, as though it were bent upon attracting attention to itself. The surface is as hard as ice and bears the weight of a man, and the cold is intense; but exercise

on such a day is an endless delight, and the air is so matchless in its purity and intoxicating effect upon the spirits that the intensity of the cold, excepting as an added sense of health and delight, is the last thing thought of. That drive was perfectly delightful. The sledge was a *kibitka*, a sort of hooded cart on runners, drawn by two Finn ponies—little animals which seemed to feel the intoxicating influence of the air as I did, and did their best to gallop the whole of the twenty delicious miles which lay between us and Dubrofka. The roads were perfect, as smooth as glass and marred by very few *oohavui*, or holes, some of which, in a bad season, are as deep and wide as a horse's grave. The sense of motion is never so delightful as in a sledge, and no sledge is so luxuriously comfortable as a *kibitka*. We flew along behind our little ponies like winged things, passing over the miles as though they were stone-throws. Our *yamschik*, or driver, was a most amusing fellow. He would address his ponies now in terms of the most exaggerated endearment, calling them all the pet untranslatable names in vogue in the Russian language, "little pigeons" being, I think, his favourite. Then, in a moment, his method would change, and the ponies, with all their relations both sides of the

Stys, principally the female ones, were vilified and abused in the most frightful selection of Russian "Billingsgate" eloquence that my hosts, accustomed to Russian ways of speech, had yet heard. However, his method was effective, for those twenty miles were covered in almost impossibly quick time, and by noon we were at Dubrofka, and holding a council of war with Gavril over a glass of sherry and a biscuit. Gavril was excited and proud and happy. He had ringed four wolves, which was a feat creditable in itself to any keeper, and for this he would receive a substantial *na chai*, or money "for tea." It would not be spent on tea, but that is a detail. Then, he had bought an old horse for a rouble. It had been on the point of death, and its owner would have had to bury it in a day or two. Gavril would charge five roubles for the animal in his account. Then, he had sold the skin for his own profit, and the proceeds had kept him affluently in *vodka* for the last three days. Lastly, the beaters were placed and the sportsmen had arrived, and here was he drinking a glass of sherry with four English *barins*—no wonder Gavril was happy!

But the sherry is drunk, the biscuits eaten, guns and slug cartridges have been taken out of their cases

and seen to, places have been drawn for, and we must be off.

My place was to be between A—— and C——, and Gavril was informed that, as the battue had been ordered principally for the guest, he was to do his best to direct the driven wolves towards the centre of the gun-line. This Gavril promised, after a keen glance at me (presumably to determine whether I looked good for a three-rouble note), to do, if he could. "Now then, F——," said A——, as we left the lodge for the "ring," which lay about a mile distant, "don't you make the slightest noise slipping about on your snowshoes, either going or when there: don't stir an inch from the bush behind which Gavril places you, and don't be tempted to fire at fox, hare, capercailzie, or anything else you see. If you get a sight of a wolf put your gun up by inches and under cover, if you can, or you'll never get a shot."

This was all very well, excepting the instructions as to not "slipping about on my snowshoes." They were long, narrow, wooden ones, not the Canadian type, but about six or seven feet in length by six inches in width. The foot is secured by a strap over the instep and another behind the heel, and to the beginner the task of getting along at all, seems at

first hopeless and heartbreaking. He will make a slide forward with his right foot with fair success; but he is not so fortunate with his left, for the snowshoe proves to be one of those circumstances over which he has no control. The tip of the left shoe goes crossways over the tip of the right, and when he tries to take another step forward with his right foot that member naturally refuses to move, being tightly held down by its fellow, with the result that the would-be snowshoe runner bends rapidly forwards, and either incontinently buries his nose in the snow in front of him, or, if he recovers his balance, does so only to sit down violently on the back part of his long shoes. My plight on this occasion was pitiable, for this was almost my very first attempt to manipulate or rather *ped*ipulate those slippery engines. Gavril and my friends were, naturally, adepts in the, to me, novel style of locomotion, and were up and away, gliding with easy grace over the smooth surface as if the thing were as easy as walking. Anxious to keep up with them, and full of the sense of responsibility awakened by A——'s instructions as to absolute silence, I, too, endeavoured to glide along with grace, but my efforts were only very partially successful. A—— told me afterwards that whenever he looked round I was "just

getting up." I believe this to be a gross misrepresentation of the facts of the case. But he added that on one occasion, on looking round to see how I was getting on, at the bottom of a little hillock, he very nearly jeopardised the success of the battue by bursting into a roar of laughter, a catastrophe which he only averted by stuffing the huge thumb of his snowshoeing glove into his mouth. He says that what he saw was too funny for words. When he looked round I had just arrived breathless at the top of the hillock, and was evidently intending to stop and straighten my shoes before attempting the descent. But my shoes had no intention to stop even for a moment, and started me down the slope on their own account—one pointing south-west and the other north-east. This state of things was bound to end badly, and the expression in my eyes, A—— said, was one of anguish, and boded imminent catastrophe. The next instant both my feet were in the air, high up, and my head in the snow, after which I rolled the rest of the way down the hill, a confused mass of legs, arms, and snowshoes, with occasional visions of a face bearing an expression of agony and alarm quite uncalled for by the circumstances of the case. I believe this, too, to be a distortion of the facts; but I admit that I did

have a slight tumble while going down a hill. It is a very difficult feat to perform with grace, my dear reader, and cost the writer of this article many a moment of terror, and many a plunge head first into a deep snow bath, before he acquired the art of taking a hill successfully.

But we have arrived at the ring now, and Gavril, finger to lip, is carefully placing his guns, choosing the best available cover for each, and admonishing us in turn, by signs, to be as silent as the grave and as vigilant as hawks. I had a capital place behind a thick low pine of three or four years' growth, whose branches were so laden with snow that they formed a practically solid cover for me to crouch behind. Taking my stand here I loaded and cocked my gun as silently as the operation would permit, opened my cartridge-pocket in case of a sudden demand for more ammunition, loosened my big knife in its sheath, and waited. I had a few moments to look around and admire the exceeding beauty of the scene. The sun was in his full February splendour. He gave no heat, but his rays served to make beautiful every object on which they fell, and revealed the marvellous delicacy of the rime-covered pines about me, which towered tapering upwards in all heights and shapes, the topmost bough of

each showing like the finest lace in the fairylike delicacy of its tracery, each particle of greenery being picked out and glorified with its own tiny fringe of rime which caught and reflected the sunshine. It was indeed a lovely spectacle, and filled the heart with gladness and almost awe. What a marvel, too, was the silence of it all! The only sound to be heard was the occasional thud caused by a lump of snow falling from some bough which could bear its weight no longer, and, relieving itself of the burden, sprang back to its own proper position until the next snowstorm should load it with new weights. I was growing quite dreamy and sentimental over the beauties of the scene and the wonder of the silence—and, indeed, it was wonderful when the fact was considered that there were forty-five men and four wolves all present within a small circular space—and my train of thought had led me far away from the subject of wolves and battues, when I was suddenly brought to myself with a jerk by a shrill sound which reverberated through the forest with such suddenness that I gave a violent start and nearly dropped my gun. The whistle was instantly followed by a noise which sounded as if this beautiful fairyland over which I had just been sentimentalising were suddenly converted into a pandemonium and given into the hands

of legions of evil spirits. Shrieks and yells, rattles, old iron pots and pans beaten together, every conceivable species of noise very suddenly and simultaneously assailed the ear and filled the forest with disturbance and unrest. Thoughts poetic took wing and fled away with the silence which had engendered them, and in a moment I was all a sportsman and watching with a hawk's eye every visible spot of open space before me, and listening with a lynx's ear for every sound of a padded footfall upon the snow. Several hares scudded by me in a moment and went on their way, wondering, doubtless, why the party with the gun had not made the usual explosive sound as they passed him. A couple of lovely ptarmigan flew close over my head, followed by several old blackcock, while a *riabchick*, or tree-partridge, settled on a tall pine on my left and stayed to see what all the noise meant. A frightened squirrel above my head was taking wildly impossible jumps from tree to tree, first in one direction and then in another, in an agony of terror, while a whole colony of fieldfares flitted aimlessly about from bush to bush, evidently wondering what they had better do, and deciding in which direction safety lay. But I recognise Gavril's voice amid the hubbub shouting something or other; probably he has seen the wolves, and is

trying to give us to understand the direction they are taking. Suddenly a shot on my right hand sets my heart beating so loud that it seems to drown the noise made by the beaters. But the shot excites these latter as well, and they redouble, if this is possible, the already terrific noise they are making. I wonder what A—— has fired at. Suddenly I hear A——'s voice: "Look out, F——, in front of you!" he bawls, loud enough to overtop the beaters' yells. My heart behaves idiotically, and renders breathing almost an impossibility, and I raise my gun slowly and find that I am all of a tremble. However, the gun is up, and if I catch sight of the wolves I shall be sure of getting it off. I stand thus a full minute in the very flood-tide of excitement—my nerves all of a tingle, and my heart, as I have said, making itself ridiculous. "Why don't you shoot, F——?" bawls A—— suddenly, and at the same moment I become aware that a huge grey beast is standing in front of me, deliberately turning to look in the direction of A——, whence the last recorded shout had come. Strange to say, no sooner did I catch sight of the creature—and a beautiful creature he looked as he stood with ears cocked, listening—than I became perfectly cool and collected, my heart ceased its wild con-

duct and my excitement vanished—I was myself again.

"Shall I 'pot' him, or give him a chance to run?" I asked myself. "Let him run," replied all my sporting instincts, backed up by my British ideas of fair play. "Run he shall, then," I decided, and waited. I was not rewarded for my generosity, however, for at that instant the wolf turned towards me, saw the glint of my gun-barrel, and—was gone.

He had vanished like a flash of lightning. I need scarcely say that if my wrath and vexation could have brought him back to the same spot he would have reappeared, and all the sportsmanlike considerations in the world should not have availed him again; but, alas! my chance of shooting this particular wolf—and he the father and flower of the flock—was gone for ever. The next moment a shot from C—— on my left gave me to understand that he had struck where I had spared! . . .

Lost in remorseful reflections I stood and watched. There were other wolves still in the ring. Oh, I vowed, if another member of the family comes and looks about him anywhere near me, his blood shall assuredly dye the snow! No more generosity for me, not if I know it! I shall take my chance where I find

it. . . . It was as though Fate said, "Have, then, thy wish!" for at the instant a fine wolf, but not nearly so large as the first, cantered by me, thirty yards away, followed by another, his exact counterpart.

"Now or never, if I want a wolfskin to take home," I thought, as I sighted the leader and fired. As the shot rang out, the wolf bounded into the air and fell over. I shifted the barrel as quickly as possible a couple of yards to the right, expecting to find wolf No. 2 still available; but it was as though no such creature existed—he had vanished, like his father, now deceased, into thin air.

A furious shouting and screeching of all the bad names in the vocabulary from the direction of the beaters soon gave me to understand that wolf No. 2 was endeavouring to break through. He did not succeed immediately, however, but reappeared at intervals during the next ten minutes, giving each of us one or more long shots. Whether he was hit or not I never found out—probably not, for slugs spread hopelessly wide at long distances—but in any case he eventually escaped through the beaters and got safely away, though the men, and women too, did their very utmost, most pluckily, to defeat his intentions, placing themselves over and over again in his way as he

rushed by, and turning him back, in spite of all his snarls and growls, into the ring.

With his escape the battue was over, and we assembled to view the results. Close to A——'s ambuscade lay dead the mother of the family, a rakish-looking creature, somewhat mangy, and with a ferocious expression of face which told us plainly that if she had not been shot dead the *coup-de-grâce* would have been attended with some personal risk to the giver. My victim was the next rendezvous. He was alive, and at our approach tried to get up, snarling and snapping viciously as we came near. A dig with the big knife soon put the poor animal out of his misery, and the meeting adjourned to the spot where fell the father and guide of this interesting family. A gigantic fellow he was indeed, and an awkward customer to meet in the dark. There he lay dead, but terrible in death, his great fangs gleaming white from the midst of the mingled blood and froth which oozed out of his mouth. C——'s shot had hit him fair, and knocked his fierce life out of him on the instant. Now that I had placed one of the family to my credit, I felt that I no longer regretted having refrained from taking a mean advantage of the splendid animal. A—— told me, however, that my

compunction had been quite misplaced and that I deserved to lose him, "for," he said, "in shooting wolves and foxes you must swallow your sportsman's code and shoot when and how you can. Neither animal will ever give you a second chance if you do not seize the first." Perhaps A—— was right.

So ended the battue. But there was a spectacle worth seeing when the beaters came upon the scene. At sight of the dead wolves men, women, and boys danced and shouted with delight, and, standing round the defunct creatures, vied with one another in their selection of bad language appropriate to the occasion. It was enough to shock even a wolf, and it was as well for those poor stiffening corpses that they were spared this public declaration of the unanimous opinion of the people as to their characters. A *vedro* of *vodka* appearing on the scene, however, the thoughts of keepers and beaters alike took a new direction, and we left the field of battle, now converted into a banqueting-hall, to the merrymakers. It was nearly two o'clock, and the hunger which possessed us was wolfish. It was as though the departed spirits of our fallen victims had passed into us, the result of this metempsychosis being that the Irish stew which we had brought with us in the very stewpan wherein it

was engendered, and which had been heated up for us during the battue, tasted as no other Irish stew has ever tasted before or since, and disappeared so rapidly that the transmigrated spirits had clearly lost nothing by their change of abode. Then came the paying of the beaters, now returned happy and noisy from their bacchanalian orgy. Three or four rows of ten beaters in each were placed in line to receive the small packets containing the stipulated sum, with fifteen copecks extra added for three wolves killed, at five copecks each wolf.

I noticed that in spite of their excitement and happiness each person—man, woman, or boy—carefully counted his little pile of silver before tendering his "God give you health," which stands for thanks in the *moujik's* vocabulary. This fact led me to the conclusion that the Russian peasant is a cannier person than I had previously supposed.

Then came the delightful drive home, with the added joy which the feeling of success gave us. The ponies were as fresh as ever, having been treated to an unaccustomed banquet of oats, and we flew along homewards no whit slower than we had come. The sun was still bright, but the shadows were longer, the short day was closing in, and the cold was intenser

than ever. Not a soul was stirring in the villages as we galloped through them, only the usual uproarious shouts came from the direction of the village *kabák*—that blot upon Russian progress and prosperity; the crows, grey-hooded fellows as well as their black brethren, were already winging slowly homewards, to circle and play for an hour or so over the tops of the trees whereon they intended to lodge, probably by way of laying in a supply of caloric with the exercise sufficient to last them through the long cruel hours of the bitter February night. Blackcock were to be seen here and there sitting by scores on the tops of the highest trees. They would have preferred to be comfortably housed under the surface of the snow, *more suo*: but the surface was far too hard to admit of the headlong plunge into it which these beautiful birds make when the snow is soft enough. Gradually the sun sinks and disappears; the ponies are getting a little fagged now, and the pace is not so good, as with sledge-bells ringing merrily, and the little ponies steaming, A—— and I glide gaily into the town, each of us richer by a wolfskin, and one of us also richer by a far more valuable acquisition—an experience, the memory of which, like a thing of beauty, is a joy for ever.

XV

THE ANGLER IN RUSSIAN WATERS

In thus sitting down to write a chapter upon angling, I do so under the depressing consciousness that I shall undoubtedly incur the scorn and contempt of every real member of the fraternity of that gentle art; I shall certainly be detected by them as the merest of amateurs, for so, alas! I am. I know very little about fishing; I am ignorant even of the proper expressions to use when describing an exciting battle with a monster of the deep; I scarcely can distinguish one fly from another, and am the commonest tyro in the art of throwing it, when chosen. I must therefore ask the kind indulgence of the angling reader, and beg him to accept my crude remarks as the uncritical record of one confessedly ignorant of the subtleties of the craft; all I hope to achieve is to give, for the benefit of the general reader, a short account of the varieties of fish to be found in North Russian waters, and the means employed by Muscovitish sportsmen to catch them.

To begin at the very beginning, that is, at the bent pin and impaled worm dangled by infant hands from the end of a piece of string: the great bulk of Russian streams contain precisely the same regular inhabitants as our own—perch, roach, bleak, an occasional bream, gudgeon, and pike; in fact, all the commoner varieties of fresh-water fish, all of which are angled for by the million in Russia, much as the million angles for them in this country. The bobbing float is watched as eagerly there as here, and as patiently; but whereas "bottom fishing" is to the British angler the merest rudiments of the art, to the Russian sportsman it constitutes the alpha and the omega—the beginning and also the end of it; he does not soar beyond this point, he has no cognisance of fly-fishing, unless he happens to have been taught the art by an Englishman; and there are at present but few streams in which he can practise it even when acquired.

I am writing of Northern Russia, not of the adjoining country of Finland, where things, as I shall presently show, are different; nor do my remarks apply to the south of Russia, of which I know nothing.

Those of my readers who have made the journey to St. Petersburg by train, passed, but in all probability did not observe, a small station, close to that of

Gatchina, very near the end of their long spell of travelling, for it lies but two hours from the capital; it is called Sieverskaya. Even supposing that their attention was attracted by the unpronounceable name of the place, it is certain that they did not guess that a short ten-mile drive from this wayside station would bring them to a small river, in which may be had, by those privileged to enjoy it, trout-fishing absolutely unrivalled either in this or in any other country. And yet such is actually the case. At the time I write of, some few years since, the right of fishing this beautiful little river was vested in the persons of five gentlemen, three of whom were Englishmen. These gentlemen had acquired the monopoly at considerable expense, and now employed several keepers to preserve it. Trout were so abundant and grew so large in this delightful stream, that the proprietors were able to establish a rule that no fish weighing less than a full pound should be taken out of the water. The side of their charming Swiss lodge overlooking the river was decorated with tracings of some of the largest trout taken, the drawings being made from the actual fish immediately after capture, its exact weight and the date of taking being noted under each tracing. Among these *fac-similes* of deposed monarchs of the stream

were many giants of five and six pounds weight : all pure river trout, be it observed, and all captured with the fly. In spite of the rule by which the comparatively respectable fish of a pound weight was returned to its element, the fortunate member of the Zaritch club was able to distribute among his friends, as the result of a fair average day's sport, from fifty to eighty magnificent fish, varying between two and four and even five pounds in weight. This same river runs through the Gatchina estates, where it is preserved for the use of the Imperial family, who do not, I believe, show much appreciation of their good fortune in possessing one of the very finest trout streams in the world. However, the keepers no doubt enjoy themselves amazingly, and probably numbers of poachers as well, spinning for the fish and netting them to their heart's content, and sending their goods to the St. Petersburg market, where they find a ready sale and are immensely appreciated. Indeed, a trout must be called a Gatchina trout in order to command the best price in the metropolis ; in fact, all trout, when offered for sale, are dubbed "Gatchina trout," for any member of the family coming to market without that title would be regarded with suspicion as not the real article. Personally I can say nothing as to the fishing in the Gatchina portion of the river, for

not being either an Altesse Imperiale or a poacher, I have not been privileged to judge of it; but assuredly if half the fish which are sold as Gatchina trout actually hail from those preserves, the sport there must be the most magnificent in the world, for the river must certainly be alive with fish.

I have, however, had the rare privilege of angling at Zaritch, the semi-English club whose waters form a portion of the same Gatchina river, and I may fairly affirm that for pure trout-fishing it would be very difficult to find its equal; while its superior does not, I am sure, exist anywhere.

Between the station at Sieverskaya and a village known as Bielogorka there is a saw-mill, which is worked by the trout-loved waters of the Zaritch river, and below this mill there is not a single trout, great or small, to be found. The sawdust is, apparently, fatal to their existence. In their place, however, are multitudes of grayling, who seem to have no objection whatever to the flavour of sawdust.

I remember spending a most delightful month among these same grayling, many years ago. I was a schoolboy then, spending my summer holidays in Russia, and I think I can recall nearly every fish, of any size, that I killed during that keen angling period. But the

picture which is impressed more distinctly upon my memory than any other is that of a certain monster fish—the king and grandsire of all the grayling—which I did not catch indeed, but which my eyes beheld, and which my fingers actually touched. Grayling have been known to grow, in the Zaritch river, to the enormous weight of four pounds. I do not think my friend can have been quite so large as that; but he was undoubtedly a splendid fish, and must have turned the scale, if I had ever got him so far, at three pounds, at least. This monster was a well-known character; all the village knew of his existence, and had tempted him, for years, with worms and other delicacies; but all in vain. I had seen him rise, in his majesty, many a time, and had assiduously whipped every inch of the mill-race which was his well-known home. On the particular morning of which I have now to tell, I was standing upon a small island formed of sandy ground and stones, which jutted conveniently out towards the centre of the race, affording an excellent footing to the keen but inexperienced angler thus using it, for there were no trees nor bushes to foul his tackle and damage his temper; the coast was as clear as need be. I had whipped the stream for half the morning and had caught a few whipper-snappers: cadets of the grayling

family, varying in weight between a quarter and half a pound each; when suddenly it was borne in upon me that the great crisis of my life, as an angler, had arrived. Yes, he was on! Now, I was, and alas! still am, entirely ignorant of the subtleties of the piscatorial art. All I knew for certain was that my line must not be allowed for a single instant to slacken: that I must hang on to my fish firmly, but with a touch sensitive and elastic; and that I must "show him the butt."

Ye gods! how that grayling pulled; but then, so did I. I had always understood that the mouth of a grayling is made of extremely delicate material (which is hardly fair upon the fisherman), and perhaps this consideration modified, to some extent, my energy; but I do not think that this particular fish can have been very tender about the lip: indeed, I believe the creature must have been provided with a mouth of leather, for I pulled at him like grim death. I was determined that he should not gain a single inch upon me, and tugged steadily at him, contriving now and again to screw him up an inch or two nearer to the shore. It was a veritable case of "pull devil, pull baker" (*he* was the former, of course; though I am bound to say I pulled like one!), and after a full quarter

of an hour of stiffened muscles and double-bent rod, and quivering tackle and immeasurable excitement on my part (on his too, perhaps!), I had got him within a yard of my feet. I possessed neither net nor gaff, so I screwed away until I could raise him bodily from the water by taking a short hold of the line. Up he came, a fish of molten silver, shimmering in the sunlight, very beautiful to behold. Now he was up to the level of my little waistcoat—nay, my arms were outstretched to welcome him: my very fingers touched his wonderful dazzling sides, when splash! . . . even his lip of leather had cracked with the strain—the hook was out—he was gone! For a moment he lay motionless in the shallow water at my feet, while I stood as motionless upon the bank above him; neither of us had realised the full meaning of what had occurred: the greatness of my misfortune had not dawned upon me. Then, as the monster slowly swam away, the whole miserable truth flashed across my mind; in an instant I was wading—rushing through the water in pursuit—nay, swimming, diving after him: but all in vain, he was gone—lost to me for ever! I never beheld him again. All I had to console me was a strongish scent of his scales upon my fingers, which washed off all too soon; and, the memory of what

Might have Been, which has stood the test of Time's soap and water. Ah! well, "Tis better to have hooked and lost," than never to have hooked him at all. I regard it as a privilege to have seen that fish; perhaps his loss was a blessing in disguise. If so, it was uncommonly well disguised. I think I have written enough to prove to my angling readers that the fishing in the Zaritch river is about as good, whether for trout or grayling, as is to be met with anywhere.

Personally I never did any very great execution among the trout at Zaritch, for this reason: Zaritch is a shooting as well as a fishing club; I am a sportsman first—or perhaps "a hanger about in woods" would be a more correct way of describing my proclivities—and an angler afterwards; consequently, when it became a question as to whether the forest or the river-bank should be my hunting-ground for the day, I invariably chose the former. Occasionally the two were happily combined. I remember one day an English friend was fishing with great success from a raft in mid-stream. The deck of his raft bore, besides the spoil of the river, several fine mallard, which he had shot as they passed overhead. Suddenly, as he threw his fly now here, now there, he perceived, to his intense surprise, a fine bear come out of the cover on the far side, bend

its head to the water's edge, and indulge in a long drink. Then the angler did what he was sorry afterwards to have done. He raised his gun, and when the bear, starting at the movement, turned to retire, he peppered him in the hind-quarters with a charge of duckshot. The bear gave a roar, bit at the wounded place, and quickly disappeared in the thick cover, leaving no trace of his whereabouts. Now comes the most curious part of the story. Next winter, the members of the club were one morning summoned by the keeper to a *bear-chasse*, a rare event so near the metropolis. A fine bear had been found and ringed. The beat was made and the bear was killed. When his skin was removed a curious discovery was made. Certain perforations in the hide, about the region of the tail, gave positive indication that this was the very animal shot at by my angling friend many months before: clearly the affair had not been alarming enough to drive Mr. Bruin from the locality.

No record of the piscatorial possibilities of Northern Russia would be complete without mention of the truly remarkable salmon-trout fishing to be obtained in the adjoining provinces of Finland, and especially in the neighbourhood of the lovely Imatra Falls. Fish weighing upwards of twenty pounds are frequently

captured in that delightful part of the world, but not with the fly. All the angling done here is accomplished with minnows and other spinning baits. The resident Finn keepers convey the sportsmen up and down the tumultuous river in their little light boats, which they manage marvellously with the aid of a paddle. These men, when a good fish is hooked, think nothing of shooting small waterfalls in their little skiffs, rarely if ever coming to grief in essaying this apparently exceedingly dangerous performance. There is much good fishing to be had, however, in this country of a thousand lakes, besides that of the far-famed Imatra river. As I write a beautiful vision crosses my mind: it is a small Finnish lake, measuring perhaps six miles at its longest point; it is dotted with several little islets, one of which is so thickly covered with lilies of the valley that it is positively impossible to tread upon the earth without crushing several of the delicate white bells. This beautiful lake was full of the largest and cleanest perch I have ever seen or heard of. It was also said to contain enormous pike. Indeed, the keeper employed on the spot informed me that upon one occasion he had hooked so huge a specimen that it had towed his boat all round the lake, a little trip of perhaps fifteen miles or so, before he was happily

enabled to land and kill it. He declared the monster weighed eighty pounds: perhaps it did; but I do not vouch for the absolute accuracy of any part of the story: I feel that that little excursion round the lake did not extend to the full distance claimed for it; I think it may have been a mile or two less, especially as this particular keeper was, even for a Russian, a remarkable and pre-eminent liar: he was a pedigree liar, and came of a good old lying stock; I knew his father, and he, too, did not disgrace his forebears in this elegant accomplishment. I confess, however, I never quite liked bathing in that lake at Hottaka after the keeper's yarn—a ferocious and hungry pike, weighing eighty pounds, might make things so very unpleasant for a bather, if so disposed. I hope I shall not be suspected of a distant connection with the accomplished family of Egorka, the keeper just alluded to, if I enlarge in this place upon the phenomenal size and numbers of the perch in this same lovely lake of Hottaka. We used to travel down to the nearest station by an evening train, drive seven or eight miles in a Finn *taratika*, a kind of small dogcart; sleep at the lodge (or try to), shoot snipe all the morning, and fish for perch in the afternoon. It was a delightful programme, for the lake was a perfect paradise and

the snipe-shooting excellent. But there was one weak spot in this list of delights, and that was the lodge wherein we tried to snatch a few hours of slumber. It had long served as a superior peasant's cottage, and had during that office accumulated so vast a collection of the crawling horrors of unclean wooden houses that now, in the new era of soap and water and wall papers and iron bedsteads, though their numbers were gradually becoming reduced, there were still sufficient to satisfy the most exacting. No sooner were the lights out than the walls were immediately covered with serried ranks of these warriors, who had come to see whether we had arrived from town and were in bed. If we were—oh! Himmel. . . . Add to the attractive charms of these domesticated creatures the seasonable mosquito, who, during two sad months, simply renders the atmosphere of Russia thick with myriads of singing tormentors, and you will realise what a night of it might be had at Hottaka by those who like this sort of thing. Personally I did not care for it: I am ridiculously faddy about the crawling beauties of nature. In fact, I could not and would not and did not stand it. I used to put to sea in a boat, armed with two pillows and a blanket. The crawlers did not accompany me, for I took care to

remove any early wanderers before starting; but the mosquitoes were kind enough to escort me, some hundreds of them, for a mile or so, to sea. There, in mid-ocean, a horrible fate overtook them. I cannot express the satisfaction with which I allowed them to settle, as the boat ceased to move, upon my hands and face and limbs, and then deliberately executed every single one ere I lay down to my hard-earned repose!

Those of my readers who have never experienced them, cannot possibly realise what a pest these little creatures can be when there are swarms of them about. Never shall I forget a certain scene in this connection. It was a Sunday morning, and the place—Mourino, where, as I have already mentioned, there exists a colony of Britishers, residents in St. Petersburg, who spend the summer months in this charming retreat. Here, on those Sundays when the British chaplain being engaged elsewhere could not hold a regular service, prayers were wont to be read by a respected member of the colony, to the accompaniment of the ceaseless song, in all keys at once, of myriads of mosquitoes. The occasion I recall was a special field-day for these pests; there were thousands in the room. Now, it is too much to

expect of any Christian, even when taking part in divine service, that he will allow a mosquito to settle on hand or face, insert its little sharp tube into his quivering flesh, and forthwith commence to suck his blood, without instant retaliation in the shape of a blow designed to crush the enemy *flagrante delicto*. Hence, from the very first word throughout that service it was this sort of thing: "Dearly beloved (smack) brethren (smack)," &c. Prayers, hymn, and sermon were all accompanied by a running fire of mosquito-crushing smacks, just as though parson and congregation were applauding one another as they read and sang. Mosquito blinds are a necessity during a hot Russian summer, but even these do not keep out all or nearly all the maddening creatures; quite enough remain to drive the coolest and calmest of human beings frantic.

But I am wandering from my perch. The lake at Hottaka teemed with these giants. Perch of two pounds weight were common, and they might occasionally be found as large as four pounds—at least I was told so—not, in this instance, by the pedigree liar aforesaid. It may be true; I caught many fish whose weight varied between two and three pounds; but I do not think my largest specimen

exceeded the latter figure. We used to get ourselves rowed slowly over the water, in and out of those most beautiful flower-carpeted islands, spinning a Totnes minnow behind the boat: with this bait to tempt the fish, it was seldom that many minutes went by without a rise. These perch were, when properly prepared, capital eating.

It is not my intention to consider the subject of Russian fish from the point of view of the trading fishermen; but I may mention that quantities of fine salmon are netted in the Neva during the summer months, and very occasionally one may be caught by the angler with minnow or fly, but such an event is rare indeed. The principal fish of commerce in this land of fresh water, where salt water fish are unknown, is the sterlet, which hails from the Volga and its tributaries. For this fish fancy prices are paid by its admirers the gourmets, who esteem it well enough to pay for it at the rate of about twenty shillings per pound weight, if the fish be a large one: little ones of a pound or two cannot command this price. Personally, and speaking as a mere amateur, I do not consider the sterlet to be even a respectably palatable fish; but probably that is the fault of my palate. The sterlet seems to be a lazy, spiritless

creature, of no value to the angler; and the same may be said of the sig and the soodák, though both of these, and especially the former, are quite delicious eating.

To sum up in a very few words the subject of angling in Russia: the country is singularly poor in streams affording sport worthy of the angler's art. With the sole exception of the wonderful Zaritch river, I believe there is not a single trout stream in the neighbourhood, that is, within one hundred miles or so of St. Petersburg: hence there are no anglers, excepting such peaceful disciples of good old Izaak Walton as are content to perch themselves upon a bank and watch the bobbing float: of these there are many, but beyond this modest level the imagination of the average Russian angler does not soar. No doubt there are other streams, many perhaps, which would carry trout; but the sporting instincts of the population have not as yet developed to the extent of breeding trout and stocking the rivers. Perhaps all this will come by and by. Meanwhile there is neither demand nor supply; when the one comes the other may follow.

XVI

THE TYRO ON SNOWSHOES

During the course of my pilgrimage through this Vale of Tears, I have discovered one great fact, which confronts me wherever I go and whenever I undertake or essay any new thing. It is, that Experience, though sometimes a severe and pitiless pedagogue, is the only master in whom one may implicitly trust. Theories are excellent as handmaidens to practice, but it is only the latter which "maketh perfect." One of the lessons learnt by me at the hands of the unbending teacher aforesaid is, that no man can acquire the art of snowshoeing down a hill without great personal suffering—not necessarily of a physical kind, but such as temporary loss of dignity and unspeakable terror and sinking of the heart entail. I am not ashamed to confess that during my first rudimentary gropings after the knowledge of the snowshoer's art, I have suffered almost more abject fright and quailing than at any other moment of my life. There was, perhaps, one moment during which my heart failed me yet

more completely, but of that dread experience I shall treat in the following chapter. I shall now relate how I came to voluntarily submit myself to the terrors and dangers of a snowshoe descent, and my feelings and experiences during the ghastly moments which I passed in acquiring the first elementary idea of how to accomplish, successfully, such a descent.

It was A——, of course, who persuaded me to do this thing. I believe his intentions to have been amiable and his motives excellent: he knew, doubtless, that the art of snowshoeing would subsequently prove useful to me—as indeed it did; but it is hard, sometimes, to recognise blessings which are disguised in personal suffering, and A—— will forgive me if I did not at the time appreciate his whole-heartedness and benevolence.

"Isn't it frightfully difficult, and dangerous too?" I asked.

"Difficult? No! why, it's as easy as falling off a plank, my dear fellow; you'll learn it in half-an-hour!" said A—— reassuringly, as we careered swiftly along in our "troika," or three-horsed sledge; "why, ladies do it!"

This last consideration comforted me, I confess; for if ladies could "do it," surely there could not be any great danger or difficulty in acquiring the art!

It was A—'s recital of the delights of flying like lightning down the steep snow-covered hills, and the contemplation of the three or four pairs of snow-shoes sticking out of the well in which the driver of the troika stood, which had somewhat alarmed me.

These shoes, which formed the *raison d'être* of the present expedition as well as of my anxiety, were about six feet in length, by, perhaps, four to five inches in width. They were slightly turned up at the front, which was pointed. On the back—the part which comes in contact with the snow—two of the four pairs had reindeer skin, with the fur outside, stretched tightly over them. The other two pairs were of plain wood, without fur. In the middle of the shoe was a leathern thong stretching across, into which the foot must be thrust as far as it would go. Then a second strap is fastened round the heel, which completes the securing of the shoe to the foot.

A—— explained that the shoes with skin are far slower than those without, but are more convenient for climbing up a slippery snow hill; for the stiff reindeer fur when rubbed against the grain prevents the shoe from slipping backwards; while in going forwards down hill, the fur then lying smooth on the snow in the direction of its own "grain," it does not very appreciably retard the motion. The snowshoe which

is made of hard bare wood, however, goes down hill far the faster of the two kinds: but, for any save an accomplished snowshoeist, it is exceedingly difficult to climb *up* a hill on them. So much for the two kinds of shoes. I was to make my *début* on the fur-lined ones, A—— informed me, as all beginners did. I was thankful for that, at all events, for I did not relish the idea of flying madly down hills at the mercy of a pair of winged and lightning-tipped engines, which might take me anywhere they pleased, for all I should be able to do to prevent them. Consequently I was glad of anything that was likely to "retard the motion," even by ever so little.

Had not my anxieties as to my approaching fate on snowshoes somewhat spoiled it, that drive through the crisp, sunny January air would have been altogether delightful. The clear frosty atmosphere was like champagne, and seemed to put one into the wildest of spirits. The motion of the troika, too, was most exhilarating and delightful. Troika horses are specially trained for their work. They consist of a shaft horse, whose duty is to trot as fast as he can lay legs to the ground, while his two fellows, one on each side, do their utmost to gallop fast enough to oblige him to "break." The pace is consequently tremendous, and the sensation the very poetry of motion. As for the

driver, he too must be specially trained for the work, which is by no means easy; great skill being required to prevent the sledge from overturning at corners, or wherever the road happens to slope ever so slightly towards the ditch.

Our man was a capital Jehu, and took us merrily along at the respectable rate of about fifteen miles an hour, all three of the horses going as if their immediate existence depended upon the speed attained, and the pace causing the poor shaft horse to break every now and again into a gallop. The language of our Yamschik, or driver, was original and bracing. This gentleman never ceased to address his horses, now in words of abuse, which would have caused a hardened British bargee to grow pale with envy, and now in terms of exaggerated endearment, which would have given points to the most sickly-sweet of lovers. It did not seem to make the slightest difference to the game little horses, however, whatever remarks he might choose to address to them. They were doing all they knew without either coaxing or scolding, and had no time to listen to his blandishments, which I therefore concluded must be considered as merely perfunctory and a part of the show. The Yamschik was surmounted, as to his head, by a ridiculous little pork pie hat with several short peacock-feathers stuck into

it in a very rakish manner. I learned afterwards that the wearing of these feathers, as signifying the highest rank among isvoschiks, that of troika-driver. ensures the possessor the greatest possible consideration among his fellow whips.

We darted through several villages, the inhabitants of which appeared to be all either dead or asleep, or wanting altogether, for we never saw a soul excepting an occasional child, which rushed out into the frost, clad in its little cotton shirt alone, to stare at us as we passed. But the village dogs were very much alive, each house contributing its own private cur, which it seemed to shoot out at us as we dashed by, and which flew insanely at our sledge-runners, and endeavoured to devour them. They were such thin, gaunt specimens of canine misery, that I am sure they would have gladly consumed a sledge-runner or two and felt all the better for it! The houses in these villages were all banked up, to the height of half way up the small windows, with earth and sand and all sorts of refuse, in order to keep out the cold. The windows themselves were all pasted up; for the Russian bids farewell to fresh air from September to June; and even in the three summer months he does not admit more of it into his house than he can possibly help.

Sounds of revelry, even at this early hour of the

morning, greeted us from the closed doors of the *kabák* or drinking-shop; but the windows were so dim with the reeking heat within, and so dirty withal, that we were unable to catch a glimpse of what was passing inside.

At last, after a glorious twelve-mile drive, accomplished well under the hour, we pulled up the steaming little horses at our destination—Mourino. Here, after a hasty luncheon, a mere snack, as A—— said, to keep the cold out, for we should have a "proper lunch," he added, by-and-by, we prepared for the business of the day. The snowshoes had been unpacked and placed ready for us outside the lodge, on the snow. A—— and I were not the only enterprising snowshoers present, for B—— and C——, two other friends, had arrived in a second troika. My three companions were all adepts in the art; I alone was, alas! a beginner. I did not even know how to get into my shoes, and was fumbling frantically with them, back to front, when A—— kindly came to the rescue, and pointed out the absurdity of my proceedings. I need hardly say that I had stipulated for the very slowest pair of shoes available, and in response to my piteous appeal, A—— had provided me with a pair which, he declared, would scarcely run down a hill at all, unless a boy went behind to push or whip

them along. I afterwards found that A—— had grossly exaggerated the slowness of those shoes,—but of that anon. Meanwhile, after much fumbling with the straps (during which my gloveless fingers were lost to me, so far as all feeling in them was concerned), I at last succeeded in getting my feet into the flimsy receptacle provided for them and fastening the heel-strap satisfactorily. Our nether limbs were clad in *valinki*, long felt over-boots which reached well over our knees, and gave us an extremely elegant appearance, endowing us with some of the nimble grace, about the legs, of an elephant.

Then we started:—at least *they* did. My three friends glided away over the snow with the swiftness and agility of sylphs (whatever these may be). I boldly followed them to the extent of one step or slide with the right foot. Then misfortune overtook me; it seems my foot did not glide in a straight line, as was expected of it, but took a diagonal direction, crossing the front portion of my left shoe. Consequently, when the latter attempted in its turn to glide forwards, it found itself brought up suddenly with a jolt, causing the writer of this paper to bury his nose in the snow, and to mutter words of gentle reproach. Rising to my feet, and glancing towards the retreating forms of my three expert companions, I hastened

to re-direct my shoes in the way they should go, but could not get them to agree with me upon the subject. There must have been some coldness between those shoes, or perhaps a natural antipathy over which I had no control. They would *not* remain side by side, even for a moment. They kept shying apart from one another, carrying my legs with them, and placing me thereby in an extremely awkward position. Then again, if any little bush, or even a tree, happened to lie in our path, instead of consenting to pass by it, like sensible things, both on one side, they invariably insisted upon going one on either side of it, losing sight of the fact that I was thus left in the middle to negotiate the obstacle as best I could. This I generally had to do by getting out of my shoes at one side of it and struggling into them again on the other. To express my exact mode of progression in a few words, whenever I was neither engaged negotiating a tree nor in trying to prevent my legs from drifting apart, I was falling forwards on my face—unless indeed I was sitting down violently backwards,—a part of the performance in which I displayed the greatest aptitude. I should not like to hazard a guess as to how long I took plodding laboriously over the hundred yards or so of level going which had to be traversed before the first hill was reached, but I know

A——, B——, and C—— were very rude about it, and told me they were longing to see me take my first plunge. They were good enough to show me how extremely simple the thing was, and proceeded to "fly" a terrible-looking descent for my edification. It certainly looked delightfully easy as exemplified by A—— and C——; but B——, who seemed to be going along equally successfully until half-way down, all of a sudden disappeared amid a cloud of snow, reappearing an instant after an undistinguishable medley of arms, legs, and snowshoes. The sight filled me with horror and alarm, but to my astonishment he disentangled himself the next moment and returned to us smiling and unhurt, merely remarking that he "hadn't observed the drop."

"Good heavens," I said, "what drop?" They did not surely expect me to attempt the descent of precipices?

"A drop, my dear fellow," said A——, with exasperating and heartless levity, "is a small precipice of anything from three to twenty feet in height, and the snowshoes fly it if you only keep them straight—well, like winkie!" My natural and immediate thought was that I would rather winkie (whoever he might be) took the drop than I; but all I said was, "Oh yes, I see."

All the same, I did *not* see myself flying a precipice

for the benefit of three frivolous creatures, whom I must say I had up till now regarded as my good friends: so I stipulated for an easy descent, "just to begin with," and to end with too, my foreboding conscience added, for it was quite clear to me that a single "drop" would end my sufferings upon this earth, so awful had been the sight of B——'s downfall: and he an expert. So I struggled along the brow of the hill until at last I found a descent a trifle less terrific than its immediate neighbours, and here I resolved to make my first attempt. A——, B——, and C——, good souls all, as a rule, but rude, heartless men to-day, laughed at my fears: "Why," they said, "it isn't a hill at all, one of us had better shove behind!"

I assured them, that so far as I was concerned it was a hill, and a very good hill too—anyhow, I was not going to risk my life on anything steeper at present; and then I directed my snowshoes as accurately as I could, took a long breath, forgave my enemies, (including A——, B——, and C——, whom I simply hated at this moment, with my whole heart), repented of my sins, tipped my shoes over the edge of the incline, and let myself glide into the *Ewigkeit*. . . .

As I went over the edge, I distinctly heard my three friends all shouting together, and this is what I gathered of their last counsels:

A—— cried: "If you feel yourself going, throw yourself on your face."

B—— yelled: "If you feel like a mucker, sit down on the backs of your shoes."

C—— shouted: "If you feel yourself going, lean," . . . but by that time I was beyond the reach of advice, for the earth had opened her mouth and swallowed me. . . .

When I recovered my breath and had managed to struggle once more into the light of day, I found that my snowshoes and I were hopelessly mixed. I could not distinguish which was I and which was snowshoe; and besides, there appeared to be a bush in the midst of us—how it got there I knew not; but as it could not very well have come to us, I conclude we went to it. Of the journey I had no recollection. Those idiotic creatures up at the top seemed to find my position vastly amusing, though personally I am bound to say I did not see the joke. It took me a full ten minutes to disentangle myself and get those wretched shoes straight, and then came the business of climbing up the hill again—a less alarming but infinitely more laborious process than that of slipping like lightning down it. After an immense amount of toil I would succeed in planting my right foot firmly in the snow, pointing upwards; then, resting upon it

with a degree of confidence which I was soon to find was altogether misplaced, I would endeavour to move the left towards it. Then the right would slip sideways over the point of the left, a frantic but unavailing struggle would ensue, and once more I would assume a reclining attitude backwards, my snowshoes being nearer the top of the hill than my head.

However, I reached the summit at last, and received the congratulations of my friends.

After this I thought I would rest a while on my laurels and watch the others go down the hills. They were delighted to show off their prowess, and I must own that they really did it remarkably well. They were all on fast wooden shoes, and the speed with which they flew—there is no other word for it—down those steep places was simply inconceivable. They could steer, too, in and out of the bushes, and shoot small precipices as though it were the easiest thing in the world. The impetus gained by a quick run down a steep hill was enough to send them skimming along for quite a considerable distance, in the most fascinating way; and in spite of my late lamentable experience, I felt that I must positively make another attempt to acquire a little of their aptitude. So, after some cogitation, I selected what looked like a fairly easy place, and started. For a

few most anxious but very delightful moments I managed (by favour of my snowshoes) to preserve the perpendicular, when suddenly my feet seemed to lose touch of the ground; for an instant I was suspended in ether, and the next I was rolling over and over, head over heels—a confused mass of limbs, snowshoes, and tons of up-heaved snow.

Spluttering and panting I came to the surface to find that one of the shoes had remained some way off and was reposing upon the snow. As for the other, half of it was on my foot, as it should be; but the other half had very much exceeded its duties. Part of it was under my left arm and part was pushed up into my cheek. As for the straps, they had entirely disappeared and were never seen again—excepting a small piece which I afterwards discovered in my coat-pocket. However, I was not hurt at all, and the skilled performers were good enough to be rather encouraging: "Well done, old chap," said A——, "that was ever so much better: never mind about the shoe, there are plenty more."

"By Jove, F——," added C——, "you'd have done that hill if it had not been for the drop: what made you try a drop?"

Now, nothing had been farther from my intentions than to try a drop, but since here was a chance for a

cheap reputation, I took it as I found it. "Oh," I said, "it's best to go bravely at these things if one wishes to learn, and it hasn't hurt me."

"I'll tell you what, old chap," said A—— cordially, "you shall try the wooden shoes now; you've no idea how glorious they are."

There was nothing for it: I had posed as the man of pluck and determination, and the character must be kept up. I took the shoes with a depressing consciousness of impending doom, and put them on. My goodness! how they slipped about; I could no more guide the things than I can direct the sun in his course. I could not even stand upon them, and fell down three times on my way to the brow of the hill, a distance of about four yards. This was a very easy hill, A—— explained, but I must not be surprised if these shoes seemed to go a good deal faster than the others, for they *were* a faster pair, certainly! The descent did not look difficult, as descents go; but on these swift shoes it was likely to prove the *facilis descensus Averni*. However, it was too late to back out; the attempt must be made, and made at once.

"Now, don't be in the least alarmed," cried A——, as a last word of advice, "and sit down at once if you feel yourself going—mind!" . . . I started. . . . To

say that I hurtled through the air like a meteor, would be to convey an altogether inadequate idea of the frantic speed with which those demon shoes carried me down the hill. All my energies were concentrated upon preventing one shoe from overlapping the other. I could think of nothing else. And as for seeing where I was going, there simply was no question of such a thing. A moment—another I dashed on my mad career, a feeling of wild exuberance came over me: was I really about to accomplish the descent in safety? Oh, triumph! . . . Then, suddenly, it was chaos.

Is this death? Where am I? It is assuredly burial, anyhow, for I am a foot or two under the snow. Something is pricking my face disagreeably; it's a thorny bush — are there thorny bushes on the other side of Styx? . . . How on earth am I lying?—On my back, facing the top of the hill, and my snowshoes are still in company with my legs, which are curled back over my head, and my face is looking from between my knees. I can't move a finger: how am I to summon assistance? It's to be hoped that the ends of my shoes are sticking up out of the snow as an indication of my whereabouts, or I may be left here unclaimed till doomsday. But hush! what sounds are those? Laughter, as I'm a buried

Briton; and the laughter, too, of my three friends! Well, of all the heartless creatures that I ever came across, A——, B——, and C—— are the worst. How do they know that I'm not killed? I —here somebody came and pulled in a tentative manner at one of my snowshoes, unfastening the buckle; then the other shoe was treated in like fashion. My feet thus freed, I was able to move once more, and struggled up stiff and cross and dazed, my mouth full of snow, my eyes and ears the same, and all my pockets ditto ditto. I dare say I did look rather funny, but that is no reason why those three men should overdo their mirth in the way they did.

"Why, dear old man," cried A——, "you went over that little drop simply like a shooting star; it was a magnificent sight, upon my word it was!" I replied that I was quite pleased if A—— was, but declined for the present to provide any further entertainment for the company. After lunch, however, feeling my spirits and dignity restored by the good things provided by A——, who threw in a few deftly-aimed compliments as to my "marvellous success for a beginner," I did resume my attempts, and gradually began to acquire some little skill. The art of guiding the shoes once mastered, nothing can be more delightful than flying down the hills at lightning speed; and

when the time came to turn our faces homewards, I could hardly tear myself away from the fascinating occupation. To sum up the art of snowshoeing in a word, so long as the shoes are your masters, chaos must inevitably attend every attempt to descend a hill in safety; but once master your shoes, and you will need no flying machine, for you have learned to fly without it!

And so, flushed with success and exercise, we returned to our jingling troika and garrulous Yamschik (he too was flushed, we found, but not with the joys of air and exercise); and amid the snatches of Bacchanalian ditties with which that worthy regaled us and encouraged his horses, and the jangle of the bells, and the clatter of twelve hoofs on the hard snow, we sped swiftly over the dozen or so of miles of forest, plain, and village which lay between us and home and our much-desired, well-deserved dinner!

XVII

AT THE ICE-HILLS*

As a test for good robust nerves, the first attempt to descend a steep hill upon snowshoes is very excellent; but let him who has thus tested his nerve-quality and round it satisfactory wait—there is still a surer test; let him see whether he can deliberately hurl himself adown the grim decline of an ice-hill, without quailing? If he can do this, he may fairly claim to be a brave of the first water. I remember well seeing somewhere—I think it was in an old volume of *Punch*—the picture of two gentlemen of a bygone day engaged in an argument concerning the respective merits of the then newfangled train and the stage coach. One of the speakers is the *laudator temporis acti*—the late driver of a discarded coach; the other a railway guard. The former is represented as saying something to this effect: "As for haccidents, why, if the coach loses a wheel, or even topples over, why, *there yer are;* but

* By kind permission of the Editor of the *Cornhill Magazine.*

when one o' them bloomin' trains runs off the rails, why, where *are* yer?"

This is very much how I regarded the respective dangers of snowshoeing and ice-hilling, before attempting either. In flying a hill upon these shoes I should undoubtedly come to utter grief: granted; but then the snow is soft, you plunge head first into it, and, as the old coachman so eloquently expressed it, *there you are!* But in attempting the ice-hill, which is terribly steep and is negotiated upon a small iron sledge, the prospect is more fearsome; in that there is no soft white snow into which you may plunge and disappear until the rude laughter of the spectators shall have died away. On the contrary, there is nothing before you but a narrow lane of hard ice, bounded on either side by low walls of beaten snow, as hard as rock, and studded with frequent lamp-posts designed specially for your ruin and exquisite discomfort. The tyro will assuredly come to grief at his first attempt—that fact may be regarded as a rule absolute—and then, to quote the old whip once more, "where *are* yer?"

Let me attempt to describe the ice-hills. Those of my readers who have visited St. Petersburg may possibly have enjoyed a drive over that portion of the environs of the Russian metropolis known as the "Islands." These islands are formed by the mean-

derings of the river Neva, which first divides the town into several portions, and then separating into four or five streams, like the outstretched fingers of a hand, converts these suburban districts into delightful islets, which are naturally much valued by the inhabitants as the park-lands of the capital. In a secluded corner of the island called Chrestoffsky there is a long avenue which, since the islands are not much used during winter as a fashionable driving resort, is yearly made over to the British colony as a site for their ice-hills. At either end of this avenue is erected, each winter, a tall platform, reached by three flights of stairs, and standing about as high as an average house. At the top of the platform is a room or landing, around the walls of which are placed comfortable seats for ladies and spectators. Sloping down from the landing is the ice-hill itself. The slope is first built of wood, and is then covered with thick squares of ice, which are frozen together and worked until their surface is as even as a mirror, and—well, there is no word to describe its slipperiness. On each side of the hill are bulwarks of about three feet in height; while, stretching away from the foot of the slope, along the avenue aforementioned, is the "run." This consists of no less smooth and slippery slabs of ice frozen together to form an unbroken stretch several hundred yards in

length, reaching to the far end of the avenue, the width of this ice-lane being about two yards or a trifle over. At the end of the run is a second ice-hill, exactly similar to the first, but turned in the opposite direction, the level stretch at its foot running parallel with that of the first hill, and separated from the latter by a low bulwark of ice and beaten snow. The width of the avenue just suffices for the two "runs," one of which thus carries the sledge to the far end of the avenue, while the other brings it back to the starting-point. The hills are just about as steep as the roof of a house: I do not care to venture upon any more precise estimate, but any ice-hill student will bear me out when I say, that no one can possibly want the roof of his house any steeper than the slope of an ice-hill: while if any one contends that the ice-hills are not so steep as the roof of a house, all I can say is, they are quite steep enough for *me*, thank you. I don't care to have my ice-hills any steeper.

At the foot of each staircase stand half-a-dozen men, employed to carry sledges up to the platform at the top of the landing. The sledges themselves are the neatest little things possible, and are designed—as far as speed is concerned—to rival the very bolts of Olympian Jove. They are made of iron, are very heavy for their size, and are ornamented with velvet cushions bearing the

embroidered monograms and crests of their owners. They are of two kinds—the single and the double sledge, the former being about two and the latter about three feet in length. The double sledges are designed for taking ladies down the hill; the single ones are for the bachelor performer. In the middle of the platform is a square flooring of ice, upon which the individual about to take the *plunge* places his sledge in order to perch himself upon it before going over the edge and abandoning himself to fate.

Before coming to the humiliating description of my first experience of the hills, I should mention that the ice-hills are supported by the annual subscription of members, the fee being about a guinea. Very few Russians belong, but there are many German and other foreign members, chiefly *attachés* from the various embassies, as well as residents. On two afternoons of the week a numerous and aristocratic company assembles in the room at the top of the hill. Here hot coffee is partaken of, and the proceedings are watched by the ladies; many of the less nervous of these themselves enjoying an occasional flight through space.

An extremely popular method of entertaining one's friends among English and German circles in St. Petersburg is to invite them to an "ice-hill party."

On such occasions the hills, as well as the runs, are brilliantly illuminated with Bengal lights; Chinese and other lanterns being hung from the trees of the avenue and upon improvised lamp-posts all along the run. The scene is fairy-like and bewitchingly lovely when the weather is fine and there is rime upon the branches overhead. After a few hours' ice-hilling the guests drive away to supper—sometimes to the host's own house, sometimes to "Samarcand," a well-known suburban restaurant close to the hills, where may be heard the wonderful Russian gipsy singers, whom every traveller in the country should make a point of visiting.

But I must return to my ice-hills. It was at such a party as that just described that I made my *début* as an ice-hillist. During the drive down, which was accomplished in an ordinary two-seated sledge drawn by a horse which whizzed us along the smooth track at a pace which laughed to scorn all such trifles as time and distance, my friend enlightened me as to the nature of ice-hilling much as I have described it above.

"It's just tobogganing within limits, isn't it?" I said, after hearing the tale.

"Tobogganing?" repeated my friend with great scorn. "Oh yes, it's tobogganing of course, in a

way, just as driving in a penny bus and going as we are going now are both driving; but you wait till you're on the hill, old chap, and if you ever tobogganed the pace you go down *it*, I'll eat"—I forget what he undertook to eat—his hat, probably, which was a fur cap, and would certainly have choked him; but that is immaterial.

"Doesn't any one get hurt?" I asked.

"Hurt? No!—knocked about a bit, of course, now and then, but not actually hurt. They would be if people were not very careful when there are beginners about. An old hand never starts off till the beginner has picked himself up and cleared out of the way."

"Oh," I said, "indeed. And does a beginner *always* come to grief at first then?"

"Always," said my friend. "You don't mind, do you? It's the grandest fun in the world watching beginners. Why, several of our members only subscribe for the fun of coming down to see the new hands sprawl about."

This was a pleasant prospect for me, anyhow. What a fool I was not to have come here beforehand to practise! I should not wonder if the party had been organised with *me* as the principal attraction. I suppose I should be the only beginner! What a disgusting

position! If there is one thing in the world I do detest above others, it is making a fool of myself in public. What was to be done? Could I refuse to attempt the descent? I certainly would do so if it were possible.

However, I soon found that there was no escape for me in this direction. Clearly I was the *pièce de resistance* for the evening—that is, I and another wretched young man; for there *was* a second victim, to my great joy. We had been anxiously expected at the top of the hill—that I could see the moment I reached the platform. A sort of general beam of pleasure and relief overspread all faces at my arrival, which said as plain as words, "Oh, here he is; now then, we shall have some sport!" There were scores of people, ladies and men, sitting and standing about; the ladies all dressed in warm furs, the men in long felt boots—*valinki* is the word in the vulgar tongue—and thick Norfolk jackets or other short coats, and fur caps. A huge urn, or samovar, filled with hot mulled claret, steamed cheerfully upon a table in the corner. It was a pleasant picture, and I should have enjoyed it well enough but for the foreboding fear which sat, like some midnight horror, upon my chest.

"Now then, old chap; come on! we're all waiting for you. Got a sledge?" cried a certain officious person, a relative of my own, for whom I had, up to

this moment, cherished some of the natural fondness of kinship, but whom from this time I began to loathe as I had never hitherto loathed man or beast (he being one of the latter).

I explained, with the best grace I could, that I desired to watch the experts awhile before endangering a life which, in a world where the good and great are so very scarce, was most precious.

"Endangering!" repeated the Beast scornfully, "there's no danger! Why, look here." Before the words were well out of his mouth he had taken his little sledge in his front paws, leaped head first with it several feet down the hill, alighting in perfect safety in a recumbent position, and was whizzing down the incline, swift as a bolt and straight as an arrow. "Don't you start off till I get back," I heard him shout as he flew, "I wouldn't miss your first shot for the world." (Return in peace, Beast, and fear not; I am not in such a violent hurry to commit suicide!) For a minute his outstretched form could be seen shooting along the run—still perfectly safe and perfectly straight—then he passed out of sight in the distance: it was quite beautiful, and looked the most simple performance possible. Surely it could not, after all, be so very difficult? Apparently the only thing necessary to salvation was to keep one's head; that was all.

Very well, I *would* keep my head: I would repeat to myself the advice of Horace (who might not have been quite so free with it, however, if he had tried his hand at the ice-hills): "*Aequam memento, rebus in arduis, Servare mentem.*" (Alas! I remembered a little Latin then: where is that Latin now?) Yes, I would keep cool. I also made another resolution: that the other victim, who was likewise by this time trembling at the brink of the dread abyss, should go down that hill before I did; ay, though I pushed him over the edge with my own hands. However, we tossed up and I won, as it happened, fairly; but I was quite capable, in my then frame of mind, of the basest deceptions, and should undoubtedly have cheated my fellow victim, somehow or other, rather than "go first."

The individual whom I have designated "the Beast" returned within three minutes after his departure, having traversed both the hills and the two long runs in that short space of time. We had tossed up during his absence, and Victim junior was now being screwed up to the necessary pitch of courage, or resolution, or desperation, or whatever the requisite quality may be called, sufficient to enable the poor wretch to abandon himself voluntarily to certain catastrophe—to be butchered, in fact, to make an ice-hill holiday. How thoughtless one is! Why could not I have realised

beforehand that I was being led to this detestable ice-hill party like a lamb to the slaughter, for the express purpose of being induced to make an exhibition of myself? Why did I not stay at home and go to bed? I had never looked at the matter in this light: one never does look at things in the right light until too late! But everything is now ready for the first sacrifice: the victim is crowned and bound and prepared for the knife; in other words, he is placed upon his little velvet-cushioned sledge, and his hands encased in the clumsy-looking leather *rookavitsi*, fingerless gloves used for steering the sledge. A dozen officious "friends" (save the title!) stand around the poor wretch as he sits still a moment before taking the dreadful plunge—gracious heavens! and I am to be the next! Well, at all events, I should have the advantage of first watching him, and perhaps gaining some useful experience before my turn came. Instruction of all kinds and much conflicting advice was showering down upon the unfortunate fellow's head in bewildering profusion. He was to touch the ice with one gloved hand whenever he desired to guide the sledge; if he felt himself gliding too much to one side he must gently touch the ice on the opposite quarter; to slacken speed he must dig both heels violently into the ice and cling to it with both hands as well; the less steering he did the

straighter the sledge would run, &c., &c. Every individual present had some advice to give—infallible advice—but, if I may judge from my own experience a few minutes later, the victim probably did not hear a single word, because there was a great booming sound going on in his head which entirely deprived him, for the time, of all discriminative consciousness: the only circumstance that he could fully realise being that he was just about to embark upon something quite as hazardous as the charge of the six hundred, but with none of the "kudos" to follow, and that he wished to goodness he was safe at home in bed. At all events, such were my sentiments shortly afterwards, and I suspect that his bore a family likeness to my own. One of the friends above-mentioned was by this time holding on to the back of the victim's sledge in order to give it the advantage of at least starting upon its course in the way it should go. Alas! poor victim; he did not long remain in the narrow path; on the contrary, he went astray into the other road, whose end is grief and tribulation and lamp-posts—ay, and the laughter of friends.

At last the fatal moment arrived, and Victim junior was launched into space. . . .

The next few events followed one another with such exceeding rapidity that it is extremely difficult to

describe them, and the reader must kindly bear in mind that the action was almost instantaneous, and did not take place at the limping pace at which my halting pen is compelled to proceed in attempting to accurately describe them. First of all, then, the sledge with its hapless burden darted straight down the very centre of the hill—thanks, so far, to the accurate start given to it by the friend at the top. Then, to my horror I observed it—as though struck by a sudden idea—head straight for the side of the incline, dash itself violently against the bulwark, and turn sharp round, so that the ribald spectators beheld the agonised face of Victim junior instead of the back of his head: truly it was a shocking sight! The rest of the descent was accomplished by that miserable man backwards: he was clinging convulsively with both hands to the sides of the sledge, and his countenance was as the face of those who feel that their last moment has arrived.

After its first fell swoop to the right, the sledge never travelled another inch in a straight line. It dashed from one side of the hill to the other with inconceivable rapidity, and back again; but as there was nothing to arrest its progress upon the hill itself, the inevitable climax was reserved for consummation upon the straight run at its foot. Once at the bottom of

the hill the little sledge seemed to go absolutely crazy; it dashed itself against the ridge of hard snow on the left, carrying away a lamp-post and two Chinese lanterns; then it flew with unerring precision straight into a small tree on the opposite side, causing the lanterns with which the latter was burdened to swing as though infected with its own madness, two of them catching fire with the oscillation, and immediately burning themselves up. This was its last effort, for flying off at a tangent from the tree on the right, it took the barrier at a bound, carrying my fellow victim with it, and committed suicide in the deep snow on the far side of the second run. As for its late passenger—the boy—oh! where was he? . . . Ask of the Chinese lanterns (and other relics of his journey), which with fragments strewed the way! He was lost sight of for some little while; the fact being that he had stuck manfully to his ship until her last wild leap had dissolved the partnership, and the two—ship and passenger—had then raced side by side through the air, the victim arriving first by a short head; this lead he had, however, augmented by turning twice head over heels, on reaching *terra firma*, while the sledge remained embedded in the deep snow at the spot where it first touched ground.

Apparently the *profanum vulgus* at the top of the

hill took it for granted that their victim was not seriously damaged. It is to be hoped that this was their conviction; for their laughter was of the most boisterous description. I am bound to say that, standing as I then stood upon the very brink of an abyss into which one victim had already been cast, and into which I was myself so soon to be hurled after him, I was not, personally, in the mood for mirth. I felt shocked at the levity of the profane crowd. As for the subject of their ribald merriment, though extremely sorry for his misfortunes, I could not help hoping that he had broken a couple of legs or so, or done himself some equally serious injury, in order to provide me with an adequate excuse for declining to submit myself to the certainty of a similar fate; but alas! he reappeared all too quickly upon the scene, and apparently not much the worse. I must say I *did* feel a little annoyed with the fellow for not being damaged; it was mean of him; he might have limped a bit, or shed a little blood, at least, instead of returning so brutally free of injury. He had emerged from his snow grave, picked himself up, collected his sledge and other appurtenances, and was now walking slowly back along the run, amid the mingled laughter and applause of the assembled multitude. The young idiot took his cap off, as though he were a great bats-

man returning to the pavilion after making a "century" in a classic cricket match! I have never cared for that young fellow since. He had the effrontery to declare that he was not hurt a bit, and had rather enjoyed the treat! He said the motion was delightful. "What about the collision with trees and lamp-posts," I asked, "was that delightful too?" He explained that he had only collided, personally, with one lamp-post, which caught him in the back and was sent flying for its pains (he seemed rather proud of this); his sledge had borne all the rest of the knocks, he said. He was good enough to add that it was now my turn, and that he fancied the spectacle would more than repay him for any slight inconveniences that he had suffered, such as colliding with birch-trees and being encircled with a ring of blazing Chinese lanterns as he spun round and round in that devil's delight of his. Other voices chimed in, and pointed out that I really *must* go now! There was nothing for it—the die was cast; with the Trump of Doom ringing in my ears I sat down on the sledge.

"Now, are you quite sure you understand?—press your *right* hand on the ice if you want to go to the right and *vice versâ*," said my friend. "Don't be alarmed—there's no danger; only keep your head and don't get flurried!"

"But if the sledge turns sharp round as it did with the other fellow?" I asked.

"Why, it's just as easy to go down backwards as it is forwards," said another spectator; "if you'll wait till I come back I'll show you."

So saying, he deliberately sat down backwards upon his sledge, and then and there launched himself in that position down the hill. I expected to see the rash creature hurled instantly to destruction; but instead of that he glided down with perfect ease and precision, keeping with mathematical accuracy to the very centre of the narrow track, and scarcely requiring to guide his sledge, though he could not, of course, see where he was going—at least I had not observed that he was accommodated with eyes at the back of his head. The sight refreshed and encouraged me. Why, after all, should I not be able to do this thing? It looked easy enough. Now then, I said to myself, *aequam memento* . . . the moment had arrived! . . . I was being straightened preparatory to being shoved off into the bottomless abyss! . . . "Are you ready?"—the words sounded a great way off. Yes, I was ready. "Away you go, then!"

The first sensation was a horrible, sickening one. My heart seemed to jump into my mouth as the sledge tipped over the edge and started off upon its

lightning-like career. *Aequam memento, aequam memento!* I repeated to myself; keep cool! The sledge, wonderful to relate, preserved at first an absolutely straight line, so well had I been started and so still did I sit. Right down the very middle of the hill we sped, like a flash, amid cheers and shouts of encouragement from above. After the first sickening gulp the sensation was not unpleasant; but the speed was terrific. I felt that my *aequam memento* would not save me if the sledge diverged but a hair's-breadth from its course. I should lose my head—I was losing it now. . . . I could feel it going; the bottom of the hill was passed in safety, but my nerves were failing —the least hitch and I was doomed to disaster. . . . Alas! that disaster came all too soon. Hardly was the foot of the hill passed in safety when the sledge, to gain some private end (probably that of getting rid of its encumbrance), suddenly darted violently to the left. I plumped my hand down on the right—*aequam memento*—crash! we went against the side, and a lamp-post went by the board; but I was not unshipped yet; I was whizzing along backwards now, in what direction I could not tell; but the pace was terrific. Keep cool—keep cool! I whispered; *aequam mem*—— crash! smash! bang!—it was the climax! Sparks and lights seemed to fly around me on all sides; I

was the plaything of all the spirits of destruction and chaos! . . . A moment or two of crashes, then a period of wild whizzing round and round, in a sitting position, upon the ice, and then all was still.

Where was I, and where was my sledge? Well, apparently *I* was in the middle of the second run, on the bare ice, with a Chinese lantern in my lap, and another entangled with my left foot. Lamp-posts were scattered over both runs in reckless profusion, and the bough of a tree lay across the first run. For twenty yards or so there was snow—much snow—scattered over the track; the place looked as if a battle had been fought there; but where was my sledge, and what was that bedlam of noise from the top of the hill? . . . Be still, O heart! it is but the unfeeling laughter of thy friends that rises upon the midnight air. I have made a fool of myself; of that there can be no reasonable doubt; but I am unhurt. *How* I came to be unhurt I neither do, nor did, nor ever shall comprehend; for I feel that I ought to be very much hurt indeed. But where *was* my sledge all this time? surely it could not be yonder object a hundred yards further on, like a little black speck in the distance? It was indeed, though. It had got rid of me, happily, comparatively early in its mad career, and had dashed on, overturning lamp-posts and strewing the

course with Chinese lanterns as it sped, until brought to its senses by colliding with a substantial tree-trunk, and there it lay upside down, the very type of ruin and destruction !

Slowly and sadly I picked my way back, while hired menials hastened out with brooms to clear away the *débris*.

Such was my first attempt to learn the mysteries of ice-hilling. My friends assured me that I had shown great promise and would soon acquire proficiency. In vain I urged that proficiency would arrive only when the breath had finally left my tortured body, if it was to be attained in the expensive manner just experienced by me. However, I tried again and yet again, and many times, and steadily improved, though at the expense of a vast number of Chinese lanterns ; and at last I accomplished the whole length of the run in safety, reaching the very end without a catastrophe. It was a proud moment, and from this time I became the wildest of enthusiasts over the delights of ice-hilling. I soon learned to go down kneeling and lying, as easily as sitting, and could even take a lady down safely after a day or two of steady practice, when I found one bold enough to trust herself to my 'prentice hand. When a lady is taken down the larger sledge is used ; the gentleman sits in front, while the lady kneels behind

him, resting her hands upon his shoulders. The art of descending backwards, which looks so hopelessly difficult at first sight, is easily acquired; the secret being, simply to keep one's gaze firmly fixed upon the top of the hill, or upon the centre of the track, and not to permit the sledge to deviate from that centre by a single hair's-breadth. "Busses," by which term is meant a collection of six, or eight, or any number of sledges whose occupants, all kneeling either backwards or forwards, cling on to one another as best they can, form perhaps the most amusing of all the methods of flying the hill. The speed attained by one of these busses is tremendous, owing, of course, to the extra impetus gained by the weight of a large number of heavy sledges massed together. The foremost sledge, which is generally occupied by an experienced ice-hiller kneeling backwards, steers the bus. When a bus comes to grief it is grief indeed, and there is much work after such a calamity for the *employés* whose duty it is to clear away scattered snow, ill-used lanterns, and *débris* generally. During a considerable experience of the "hills," I have never witnessed a single serious accident. The spills are of course numerous, and, until one is accustomed to them, terrible to witness; but it is principally the protruding runners of the iron sledges that get the hard knocks, and the lamp-posts

are the chief sufferers. I have said that I soon became one of the most enthusiastic of the devotees of the ice-hills: I may add that I am so still, and that I know of scarcely any amusement so fascinating and so exhilarating as this. The exercise is glorious; the excitement quite sufficient to prevent the sameness of the occupation becoming wearisome; and on the whole, I may safely affirm that ice-hilling is quite one of the most delightful and characteristic of the pastimes to be enjoyed in the country of the Tsar.

But for all that, and in spite of the many happy hours since spent in atoning for the first hour of dread, the memory of that horrible moment when—having watched my fellow-victim's terrible fate—I sat balanced over the edge of the dreadful abyss, knowing that I was to be despatched, next instant, on a lightning-like tour which could only end in a giddy dance with lamp-posts and Chinese lanterns for partners, is still powerful enough to send a chill of horror through me; and I sometimes wonder that I did not turn and run, jump into the first vehicle I saw, drive straight up to town and retire to bed, rather than face the ordeal of that first awful, sickening plunge into space.

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